THE PANJSHIR VALLEY 1980–86

The Lion Tames the Bear in Afghanistan

MARK GALEOTTI

ILLUSTRATED BY RAMIRO BUJEIRO

CAMPAIGN 369

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Series editor Nikolai Bogdanovic

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ORIGINS OF THE CAMPAIGN

When the Soviets rolled into Afghanistan in 1979, their eyes were on the cities: take them, they believed, and the country would follow. They were wrong. The Red Army found itself battled into a bloody stalemate in the Afghan mountains, and nowhere more than the strategically vital Panjshir Valley, where they found themselves facing the most able and charismatic of the rebel commanders: Ahmad Shah Massoud, the 'Lion of Panjshir'.

Time and again the Soviets and their Afghan clients sought to clear and take control of the Panjshir, and time and again the rebels either blunted their clumsy thrusts or ambushed and evaded them, only to retake the valley as soon as Moscow's attention was elsewhere. Over the course of the war, the rebels acquired new weapons and developed their own tactics – but so too did the Soviets. The Panjshir was not just a pivotal battlefield, it also shaped the subsequent Afghan civil wars that followed the Soviet withdrawal, and even the military thinking that is informing the new Russian military today, in battlefields far from Afghanistan.

The Panjshir Valley, literally 'Valley of the Five Lions', has long been a prized trophy for kings and conquerors alike. This 150km-long valley in northern Afghanistan, across the craggy Hindu Kush – 'Hindu Killer' – mountains leads from the Shomali Plains, just 65km from the capital, Kabul, through to two strategic ways towards the north of the country and the Pakistan border. As if that were not enough, it is potentially rich in its own right. In the 1st century AD, the Roman scholar and encyclopaedist Pliny the Elder wrote of the emeralds to be mined there; in the Middle Ages, silver from the Panjshir was minted into the coins of the Iranian Samanid Empire; and later, Renaissance artists in Europe would use blue pigment made from Panjshir lapis lazuli.

A Soviet soldier stands lonely sentry duty over a mountain road. Taken in 1988, this picture shows how personal equipment evolved during the war: note the soldier's 6B3 body armour. (RIA Novosti archive, image #21225/A. Solomonov/ CC-BY-SA 3.0)

As such, the valley has also been a strategic prize in Afghanistan's bloody history, an objective for invaders since the days of Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC and Tamerlane in the 14th century AD. Its population – some 100,000 in 1979, but only 40,000 by 1988 – was largely not

PUNCH, OR THE LONDON CHARIVARI.—NOVEMBER 30, 1878.
"SAVE ME FROM MY FRIENDS!"
"IF AT THIS MOMENT IT HAS BEEN DECIDED TO INVADE THE AMEER'S TERRITORY, WE ARE ACTING IN PURSUANCE OF A POLICY WHICH IN ITS INTENTION HAS BEEN UNIFORMLY *FRIENDLY* TO AFGHANISTAN."—*Times*, Nov. 21.

Afghanistan has long been a prize in geopolitical rivalries. In this 1878 cartoon from *Punch*, the Amir of Afghanistan finds himself between the Russian bear and the British lion. (The Cartoon Collector/Print Collector/Getty Images)

Pashtun (the dominant peoples of Afghanistan) but Tajik, descendants of settlers who arrived seven centuries ago, itself the result of changing patterns of conquest and migration in Central Asia. History is still, after all, very real in these lands.

The 'Five Lions' are generally assumed to be the five *Wali*, 'Defenders', ancient folk heroes and Moslem 'saints' (more correctly 'friends of God'). They certainly had their work cut out for them given how often the valley was the target of conquest, and when the Soviets moved into Afghanistan in 1979, the Panjshir Valley again became a strategic objective, and would again be washed in the blood of invaders.

The nine Panjshir offensives between 1980 and 1985, as the Soviets and their Afghan puppet-allies tried to wrench lasting control of this strategic valley from the *mujahideen* rebels under the charismatic leader Ahmad Shah Massoud, were some of the bloodiest, pivotal and also most revealing battles of the war. Time and again, Soviet firepower and mechanized might would punch through the valley; time and again, the rebels would regroup and retake it once Soviet attention was elsewhere. The Soviets' failure to break the rebels' organization and morale and turn immediate tactical success into a lasting strategic one was in many ways a metaphor for the whole war, one in which the Soviets could neither be defeated, nor be victorious.[1]

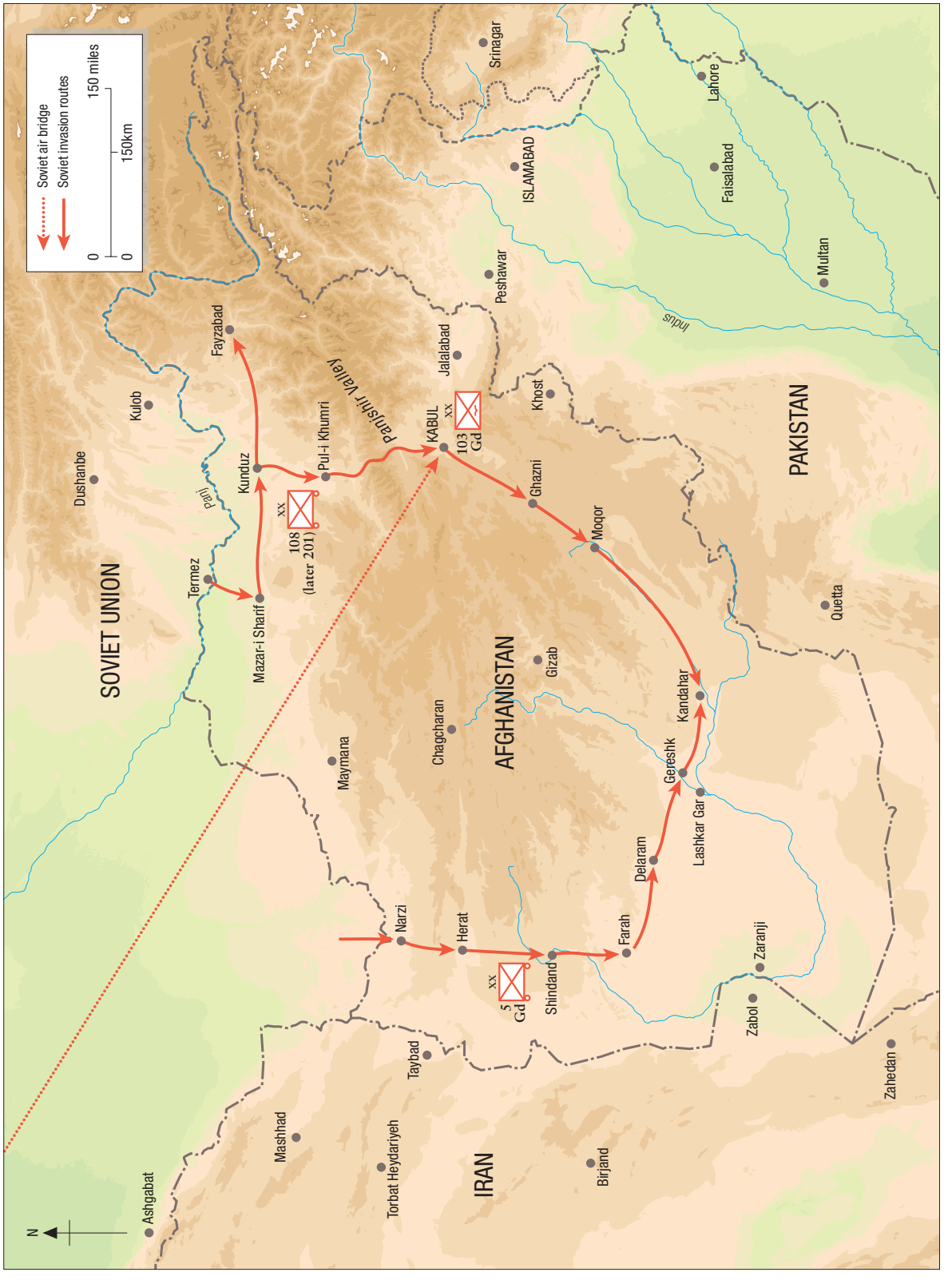
* * *

When the Soviets invaded the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) in December 1979, they neither sought

The Soviets were not the only invaders to have to contend with Afghanistan's unforgiving valleys. Here, British forces enter the Bolan Pass in 1842, at the end of the First Anglo-Afghan War. (Universal History Archive/Getty Images)

1 See Osprey Essential Histories: *The Soviet-Afghan War 1979–89*.

The Panjshir and the Soviet invasion



Babrak Karmal, the Afghan leader installed by Moscow, here photographed in 1981. To a large extent it was pressure from him and the PDPA ruling cabal that forced the Soviets to launch *Panjshir VII*, after the truce with Massoud had run its course. (TASS via Getty Images)

nor expected a long campaign. Seeing the country descend into civil war as government forces were falling back from the *mujahideen* ('jihadist') rebels, and worried about chaos and Islamic fundamentalism on their southern flank, the leaders in Moscow ignored the reservations of their generals and convinced themselves that all that was needed was a commando raid to eliminate Hafizullah Amin, the increasingly violent and wilful leader of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and replace him with a more tractable and sensible figure, as well as a demonstrative show of force to take the pressure off the Afghan Army and overawe the rebels. The assumption was that fighting would be minimal, and within six months, Soviet forces would be withdrawn. They clearly did not understand the Afghans, or the realities of the civil war.

The operation to remove Amin, *Storm-333*, was a textbook success: his palace was stormed and the capital Kabul seized, with only 14 Soviet casualties.[2] Likewise, *Baikal-79*, the main invasion, was an impressive feat of military planning and logistics, Soviet armoured columns sweeping into the country from both the north-east and north-west, and rolling around Afghanistan's main circular road system. Within a few days, all the main cities were in their hands and Babrak Karmal had been installed as the new leader of Afghanistan.

However, Moscow's assumptions that this would be enough to pacify the country were deeply misguided. The PDPA's radical socialist agenda, driven largely by an educated urban elite who regarded the rural majority of the population with a mix of condescension and contempt, had already poisoned relations with the countryside. There, traditional tribal leaders and strict Islamic principles held sway, as well as a centuries-old social contract that Kabul could pretend to run the country as much as it liked – so long as it didn't actually try to make good on its claims.

Furthermore, the PDPA was deeply divided, and Karmal's rise, intended by the Soviets to reunite the party, actually simply led to more

2 See Osprey Raid: *Storm-333*

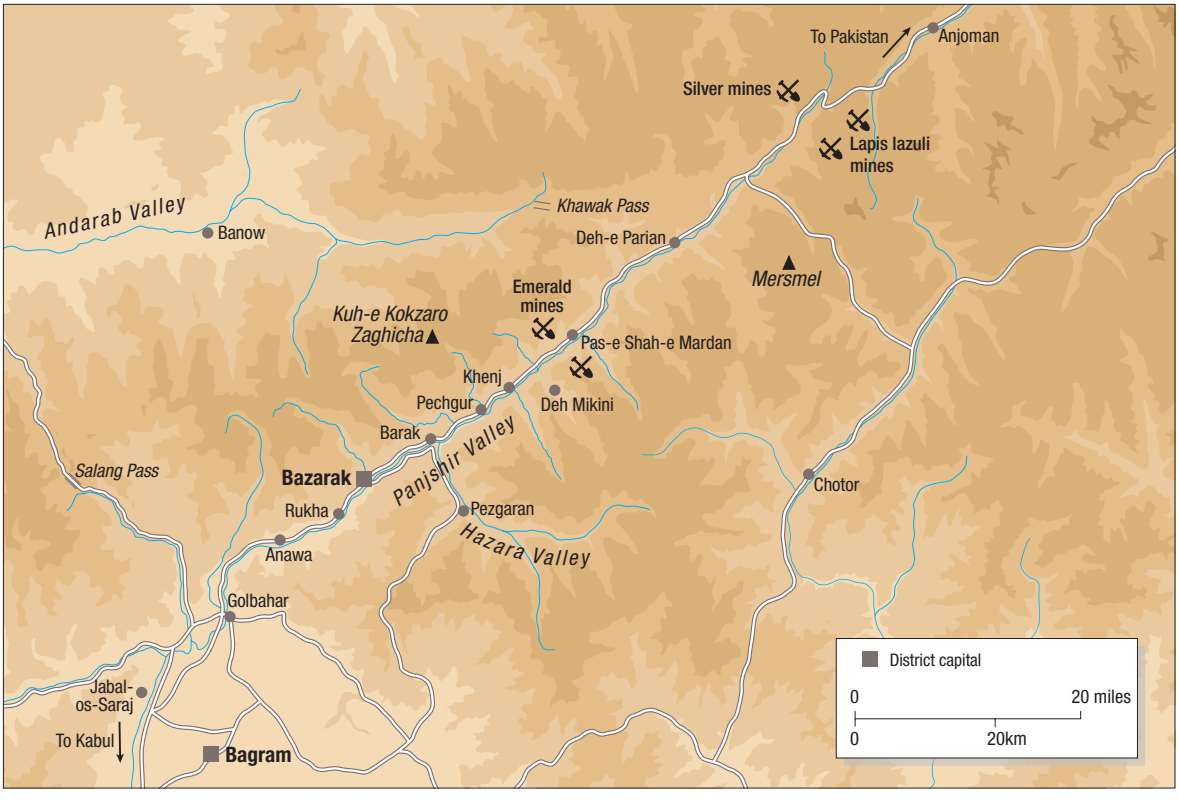
in-fighting, as the former underdogs of the *Parcham* (Flag) faction visited their vengeance on their previously dominant rivals of *Khalq* (People). Now that the PDPA could credibly be regarded as a Soviet client regime, desertion and mutinies became an even more serious problem. In January 1980, the DRA's 4th Artillery Regiment in Baghlan Province mutinied, and the Soviets had to deploy their own forces, a reinforced battalion of the 186th Motor Rifle Regiment, to quell the rising. This they did, not least thanks to their capacity to deploy artillery and airpower in support, but in a sign of things to come, they were also harassed by *mujahideen* on the way. By mid-1980, while it was clear that the Soviets and their DRA allies could control the towns and cities (even though there was a constant threat of terrorism), whenever they wanted to deploy out of these bastions and into the countryside, they would be operating in very hostile terrain indeed.

Few regions were as hostile as the Panjshir Valley, just 150km north of Kabul. Home to around 100,000 people, although this fell precipitously during the fighting of the 1980s, this included the largest concentration of ethnic Tajiks in Afghanistan. The country overall is dominated by the Pashtuns, but the Tajiks of the north are the second-largest ethnic group, with about a quarter of the total population. It was one of their number, Ahmad Shah Massoud (who became known as the 'Lion of Panjshir'), who would rise to be not only the warlord of the 'Valley of the Five Lions' but perhaps also the most powerful symbol both at home and abroad of Afghan resistance to the Soviet invasion.

This helps explain why the Soviets were so determined to bring the valley under their control. Its strategic importance was considerable. In particular, it was close to the crucial Hairatan–Kabul route. The border town of Hairatan was connected to Termez in the USSR by the unironically named Friendship Bridge across the Amu Darya River. From there, the road led south to Mazar-I Sharif, then to Kabul, through Pul-I Khumri – the site of a massive Soviet logistical hub – and through the Salang Pass (or the 2.7km-long Salang Tunnel).

Late spring and the Panjshir River snakes through the lower valley. A life-bringer for the locals, it also posed a difficult challenge to attacking forces, as the bridges became crucial chokepoints. (MANDEL NGAN/ AFP via Getty Images)

The Panjshir Valley



This was the single most important supply route for road transport to support the 40th Army and the Kabul regime, and as such it was both constantly under threat and also a strategic priority to defend. At peak, some 25,000 Soviet and DRA soldiers were assigned to road security duties, and ambushes along it were such a constant threat that Soviet soldiers assigned to convoy security duties actually proved more prone to post-traumatic stress than those in any other missions.

The Panjshir Valley stretches south-west down to the Shomali Plains at Golbahar, close to Jabal-os-Saraj, where the Hairatan–Kabul highway comes out of the mountains. Here it is less than 20km from the city of Bagram, site of one of the Soviets' main airbases, and only about 80km from Kabul itself. Thus, the valley's continued existence as a rebel haven, marshalling ground and arsenal represented a constant threat to the Soviets' supply lines and also their capacity not just to secure the capital, but to be seen to do so. From the village of Charikar, the narrow Dalang Sang Gorge leads into the open valley floor, a prosperous region when not being chewed up by war, with vineyards and wheat fields, apricot groves and pastures. The valley was studded with small villages, *kishlaks*, clusters of high-walled houses often overlooked by a small fort. Halfway up the valley, the dirt road breaks up, just past the town of Khenj, and the higher stretches of the valley are rough terrain, unsuited to wheels and tracks and often virtually impassable by winter. From here, the Khawak and Anjoman passes open onto Afghanistan's northern plains and the Badakhshan region, respectively

HOW MANY OFFENSIVES?

Soviet military operations were either given a specific and evocative name – such as *Udar* (*Blow*), or *Magistral* (*Highway*) – or else known by the geographic objective. Hence the rationale for naming the consecutive offensives covered in this book after the Panjshir. However, it is worth noting that the Soviets themselves did not necessarily adopt this sequence of nine offensives. Some, after all, were considered too small to be given a special title (arguably such as *Panjshir I*), others were regarded as essentially follow-on elements of a previous one (notably, *Panjshir V* and *VI*).

Russian sources talk about anything from six to 12 Panjshir operations. Indeed, the noted military scholar General Alexander Lyakhovsky, one of the main commentators on the Soviet-Afghan War, simply writes about three: in 1980, 1982 and 1984. That said, it is striking that in the absence of any official and conclusive tally, Russian scholars and pundits are increasingly adopting the Western approach of dividing the Panjshir conflict into nine offensives, as here.

– and through here determined rebels brought guns and supplies from nearby Pakistan by horse and mule, a tough journey that could take as long as 30 days and climbing to elevations of 4,500m. As a result, the Panjshir feels like a country within a country, with a fierce identity and – even by Afghan standards – resistance to outside domination, forces Massoud was able to tap to great effect.

After all, this was a political as much as a military campaign. The capacity of the *mujahideen* to launch rockets at Kabul and mount terrorist attacks, even if never representing a serious challenge to the government's physical control of the city, was a constant reminder of its failure to tame the rebels and guarantee its supporters' security.

Massoud also acquired a symbolic and political significance as a rallying force within the country and also an asset abroad in efforts to mobilize a constituency against Moscow. All this meant that until the end of 1985, when the Soviets began scaling down their offensive operations and preparing for eventual withdrawal, nine times the Bear would seek to claw down the 'Lion of Panjshir' – and ultimately fail.

The cat-and-mouse game between rebels smuggling in weapons and materiel, largely from Pakistan, and Soviet efforts to intercept these supply caravans, was a constant theme of the war. Here, some of the horses and Afghans captured during such an operation wait to be processed. Note the tracking dog used by the Soviets. (E. Kuvakin, CC-BY-SA 3.0)

CHRONOLOGY

1979

27 December Operations *Storm-333* and *Baikal-79*: Afghanistan invaded.

28 December Babrak Karmak declared new leader of the DRA.

1980

9–12 April *Panjshir I* operation.

28 August–20 September *Panjshir II* operation.

8–16 November *Panjshir III* operation.

1981

12 August Massoud attacks Golbahar.

6–11 September *Panjshir IV* operation.

1982

25 April Rebel attack on Bagram airbase.

16 May–1 June *Panjshir V* operation.

28 August–10 September *Panjshir VI* operation.

1983

1 January Lieutenant-Colonel Anatoly Tkachyov opens talks with Massoud that lead to an informal truce.

1984

19 April–5 May *Panjshir VII* operation.

5 September Soviet bombing raids on *Eid-e-Qurban* celebrations.

5–16 September *Panjshir VIII* operation.

1985

8 June Panjshir Front takes Pechgur.

16 June–16 July *Panjshir IX* operation.

1988

14 April Geneva Accords signed, paving way for Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.

15 May Beginning of Soviet withdrawal.

1989

15 February Completion of Soviet withdrawal.

OPPOSING COMMANDERS

Soviet commanders came and went, some time-servers but most being high-fliers sent to Afghanistan for vital combat experience before moving on to greater things. On the rebel side, though, there was one unchanging constant: the dominant force that was Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Lion of Panjshir.

THE REBELS

The *mujahideen* in the valley were part of the Panjshir Front of the Islamic Society of Afghanistan, the *Jamiat-e Islami*. Arguably the best organized and most effective of the numerous different rebel structures – the notorious Afghan stubborn fractiousness that made them so hard to be cowed also left them prone to division – the Islamic Society was also predominantly made up of Tajiks rather than the country's Pashtun majority. It emerged originally as a political party in 1972 under Burhanuddin Rabbani, a professor of Islamic theology at Kabul University. Even before the rise of the PDPA, it was considered subversive for its Sunni Islamic worldview and close links with neighbouring Pakistan. When Mohammad Daoud Khan took power

A *mujahideen* with a venerable but reliable AK-47 rifle walks through Panjshir in the snow. (USAF/Staff Sgt. James L. Harper Jr., Public Domain)

Burhanuddin Rabbani, leader of *Jamiat-e Islam*, meeting US President Ronald Reagan in the Oval Office in 1986. Although one could question Rabbani's reasons for not giving Massoud the support the Panjshir Front might have deserved, the US support that did reach the valley was undoubtedly a real help in resisting the Soviet offensives. (Cynthia Johnson/ The LIFE Images Collection via Getty Images)

in 1973, he ordered Rabbani arrested, but Rabbani managed to flee to Pakistan, where he continued to build his network and, arguably, became ever more radical.

Many of his core followers had been students in Kabul, notably **Gulbuddin Hekmatyar** and **Ahmad Shah Massoud**. Both were engineering students, both were early followers of Rabbani, and both ended up leading militant organizations. However, Hekmatyar was a Pashtun from Kunduz who became fascinated with a fiercely intolerant form of Sunni jihadism, while Massoud, although also strongly committed to the Islamist cause, espoused a much more moderate and inclusive version, driven more by Afghan nationalism than pan-Islamism. In 1976, Hekmatyar split with *Jamiat-e Islami* to form his own radical party, *Hezb-e Islami* (Islamic Party).

Jamiat-e Islami and *Hezb-e Islami* would form two of the most powerful rebel groups after the PDPA's seizure of power in 1978 and the Soviet invasion of 1979, although often in competition. Hekmatyar was backed by Pakistan's President Zia-ul-Haq and also a range of international jihadist movements such as the Moslem Brotherhood.

With the Soviet invasion, though, the focus turned away from factional disagreements; as one Russian military analyst put it to the author, 'Afghans love fighting against each other; the only thing they prefer is fighting a foreigner.' Massoud had already been involved in insurgent politics in the Panjshir and started building up a formidable guerrilla movement in the Panjshir Front, as discussed in the *Opposing Forces* chapter. Although one can in part attribute this to the common Tajik identity of the region, the socio-political bonds formed by the valley's geography, and the importance of such sources of revenue as silver and emeralds, nonetheless much of this success must be ascribed to Massoud himself, his character and his ideas.

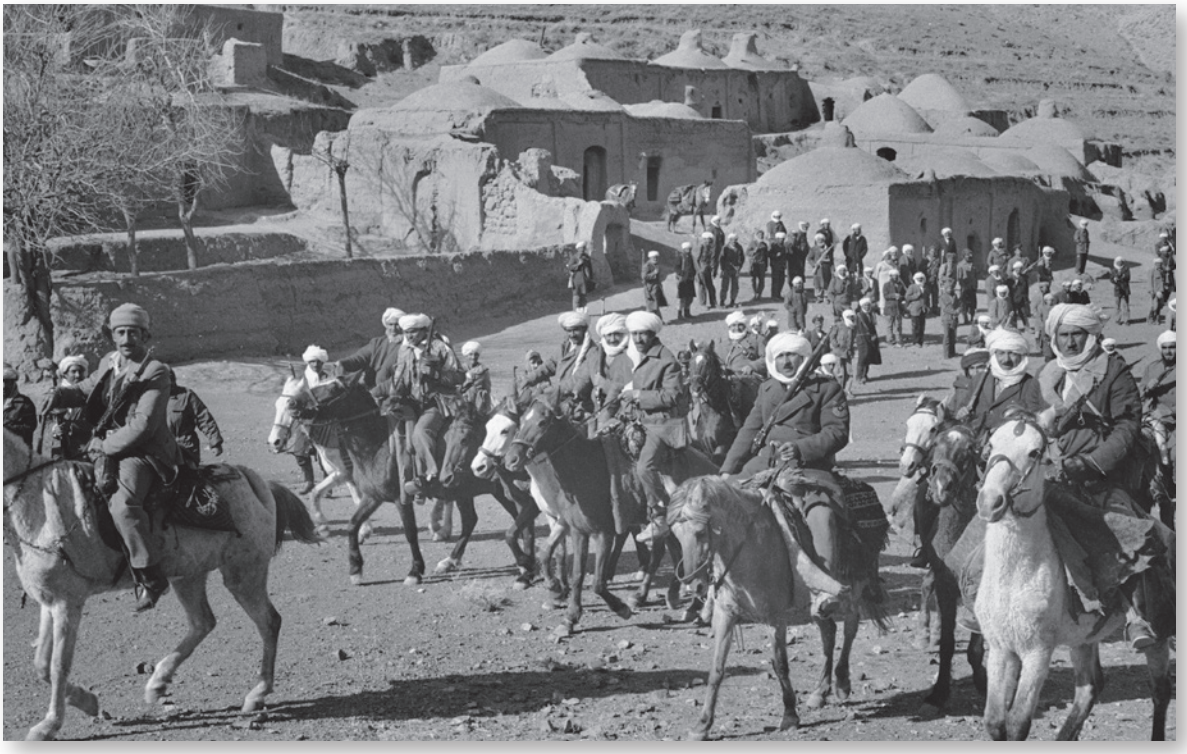
Born in the town of Bazarak in the Panjshir Valley in 1953, Massoud was the son of a colonel in the Royal Afghan Army. His early life was thus both comfortable and peripatetic, as the family moved first to Herat and then Kabul, with his father's postings. He was educated at a well-regarded Franco-Afghan school, and then read engineering at the Polytechnical University of

Kabul. His studies soon took second place to his involvement in the Moslem Youth wing of Rabbani's movement, and when Rabbani was forced to flee to Pakistan, he followed him, before returning to the Panjshir to conduct activism on the ground. This was when he acquired the *nom de guerre* Massoud: at birth he was simply named Ahmad Shah.

In July 1975, the Moslem Youth launched an anti-government uprising in the Panjshir Valley, backed by the ISI, Pakistan's notorious military intelligence agency. It failed, largely because of a lack of local support, and in many ways this was at the heart of the split with Hekmatyar. Massoud, who had been closely involved in the rising, drew from it the lesson of the importance of cultivating close links with society, even at some cost to Islamic purism. The more radical Hekmatyar, by contrast, argued that it demonstrated that a true Islamist movement must, if need be, impose its values on the population by force, leading and not following them. Much of the subsequent personal bad blood between Hekmatyar and Massoud can be traced back to this split.

Massoud remained based in the Panjshir, and after the PDPA's coup of April 1978, he hoped to capitalize on their heavy-handed Marxist reform programme, which was largely rejected by the rural population. In July 1979, he again tried to raise the Panjshir against Kabul, and he and his brother Ahmad Zia gathered some 200 supporters. They took control of a couple of valley districts and the local PDPA governor fled to Kabul, but when a force of soldiers and *Sarandoy* (the PDPA's paramilitary gendarmerie) troops arrived, they were forced to go to ground. Realizing that enthusiasm was no match for organization, he adopted a new strategy based on a lower-profile insurgency campaign, winning over local communities and elders and slowly building a military machine on the basis of his charisma and organizational skill. On that basis, he began with small operations such as a raid on the police station at Dasht-e-Rawat to the north, and slowly expanded both his forces and his authority until by the end of the year, although there were still DRA garrisons in the Panjshir, in practice he controlled the valley.

Ahmad Shah Massoud, the 'Lion of Panjshir', was known for his charisma as much for his military and organizational skills. (AFP via Getty Images)



Horses were often more suited to the rough terrain of Afghanistan than the Soviets' mechanized means, and rebels such as Massoud's often made use of them to launch rapid raids into government-held areas. (Bettmann/Getty Images)

While the Afghan rebels' enthusiasm and determination has never been doubted, most of them never really evolved their tactics and organization far beyond the level of the local bandit warlord. Massoud was a clear exception, a masterful guerrilla who instinctively grasped many of the hard-earned lessons of insurgencies from Che Guevara (whom he considered something of an amateur) to the Viet Cong. Above all, he realized that as well as the tactical qualities of surprise and the rapid concentration and dispersal of forces, a successful insurgency also needed organization, logistical networks and above all a political narrative that would win it support from within not just the local population but also enemy soldiers.

He was also blessed with a magnetic personal charisma, a sense of constant energy that won him fervent supporters both at home and, over time, with foreigners, from journalists to intelligence officers. As the journalist Nigel Ryan put it in his book *A Hitch or Two in Afghanistan*:

> There was a speed and concentration about his movements, as if he needed to dispatch his business before his enemies could catch up with him … [he] seldom stopped more than an hour in one place; and only the tiny elite that guarded, cosseted and worshipped him knew where he slept, which was rarely more than two nights in the same house.

Nor was it only Afghans and Westerners who recognized his particular qualities. His *GRU* (Soviet military intelligence) file described him in ambiguous but essentially positive terms:

> Ahmad Shah, pseudonym Massoud, which means 'lucky'. Possesses outstanding personal and managerial talents. Adamant in achieving his set

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (on the right), uncompromising leader of the militant *Hezb-e Islami* movement and a persistent rival of Massoud's, confers with another guerrilla leader during a meeting or rebel summit in Peshawar, Pakistan. (DIMITRI KOCHKO/AFP via Getty Images)

goals. Keeps his word. A smart, cunning and cruel adversary. An experienced conspirator, secretive and careful. Vain and power-hungry.

He had the knack of identifying outstanding allies and subordinates and winning their passionate loyalty. Although the Panjshir Front was shaped by Massoud and built around him, he also had a talented array of deputies and subalterns, including field commanders such as Abdul Wahed, as well as his veteran security chief Ahmad Shah Tajuddin.

SOVIET

Fully seven lieutenant-generals commanded the 40th Army through the ten years of war, and all of them at some time found themselves grappling with the challenge of what to do about the Panjshir Valley. Most were high-fliers and would go on to higher things, but all brought distinctive interests and characteristics to their role.

Lieutenant-General Yuri Tukharinov in many ways ended up heading the 40th Army by chance. In order to maintain strategic surprise, the bulk of the initial invasion forces were drawn from the Turkestan Military District (*TurkVO*), on the border with Afghanistan. In September

COMMANDERS OF THE 40TH ARMY

May 1979–23 September 1980	Lieutenant-General Yuri Tukharinov
23 September 1980–7 May 1982	Lieutenant-General Boris Tkach
7 May 1982–4 November 1983	Lieutenant-General Viktor Yermakov
4 November 1983–19 April 1985	Lieutenant-General Leonid Generalov
19 April 1985–30 April 1986	Lieutenant-General Igor Rodionov
30 April 1986–1 June 1987	Lieutenant-General Viktor Dubynin
1 June 1987–15 February 1989	Lieutenant-General Boris Gromov

1979, Tukharinov had been made deputy commander of *TurkVO* and had already visited Kabul as part of military delegations, so he made a logical choice to head the newly formed 40th Combined Arms Army when it was stood up on 14 December 1979. He was a competent rather than brilliant officer, and this was reflected in the 40th Army's operations under his command, which were characterized by meticulous planning but a failure to react quickly or to demonstrate innovation or initiative once the realities on the ground began to diverge from the plan. It is perhaps unsurprising that while he was honoured for the success of *Baikal-79*, his career then stalled: he spent the next decade as Assistant Representative of the Commander-in-Chief of the Joint Armed Forces of the Warsaw Treaty until his retirement in 1990.

Lieutenant-General Boris Tkach, the 40th Army commander who was most closely identified with the process of adapting the Soviet forces to Afghanistan. (Mil.ru, CC BY 4.0)

Lieutenant-General Boris Tkach had the advantage of having served as Tukharinov's deputy, so when he took over in September 1980, he already had a sense of the challenges facing the so-called Limited Contingent of Forces in Afghanistan (*OKSVA*). He was also one of the few of his generation with genuine combat experience, having been a divisional chief of staff in the small-scale conflict against China in the Far East in 1969. In many ways his thankless task was to begin many of the necessary processes that he would never get to see in action. General Valentin Varennikov, later deputy minister of defence, noted that:

> no one had commanded such an army under such conditions before. And although the army's real fighting began under the predecessor, the main burden fell on Tkach and V.F. Yermakov. General Tkach was in fact the 'pioneer' of large-scale operations, as well as the re-equipment of our troops in Afghanistan. It was a very difficult task, but he achieved it.

After his tour in Afghanistan, Tkach went on to command the 14th Guards Combined Arms Army in Odessa, and then to become first deputy commander of the Siberian Military District.

This meant that when **Lieutenant-General Viktor Yermakov** replaced him in May 1982, he was a beneficiary of Tkach's preparatory work, and the scaling up of the size of the Panjshir offensives reflects this as much as the changing demands of the war. A tank commander by specialism, he was an aggressive and demanding officer and clearly identified as a high-flier: he was promoted to lieutenant-colonel and colonel ahead of the usual schedule, and after his time at the 40th Army, in 1984 went on to become commander of the Central Group of Forces in Czechoslovakia, rising to the rank of colonel-general, then commander of the prestigious Leningrad Military District and

The Soviet-Afghan War remains a painful memory not just for the Russians but for all the other post-Soviet republics. This striking memorial to the fallen *afgantsy*, or veterans of the war, is in Chornomorsk (formerly Ilyichevsk), Ukraine. (HelgiAlex, CC BY 4.0)

eventually a full general and deputy minister of defence and Head of the Main Personnel Directorate.

By this time, questions were being asked about the wisdom of the commitment in Afghanistan, and this inevitably caused a degree of tension between the political and military leadership. **Lieutenant-General Leonid Generalov** felt a particular commitment to the officers and men of the 40th Army, having been Yermakov's deputy before succeeding him. He was personally brave and something of a hothead. He very much commanded from the front, and spent much of his time personally visiting local commands. He was also the first 40th Army commander to challenge the political leadership, even if behind closed doors. As another Soviet-Afghan War veteran, Colonel V.M. Chizhikov, recalled:

> At risk to his own career, he demanded that the conduct of the Afghan war be transferred to the mainstream of politics … It is up to politicians. All that the military could do next is to flood the whole of Afghanistan and turn it into a lifeless desert.

For all that, if he was going to fight, he would fight without reservation, and this was evident in his management of *Panjshir VII*, a particularly massive and ruthless offensive. Nonetheless, his lack of political skills meant that he never went on to the highest positions after Afghanistan.

He was followed by **Lieutenant-General Igor Rodionov**, another one of the stars of his generation, who had already commanded the 28th Army Corps in Czechoslovakia and the 5th Combined Arms Army in the Far East before coming to Afghanistan, a position that he later admitted in his memoirs he would not himself have chosen. He spent a tumultuous year in post, clashing repeatedly with General Mikhail Zaitsev, overall commander of the Southern Group of Forces, whom Rodionov claimed 'flew to Afghanistan [just] to earn another [Hero's] Star. He didn't give a damn … what the losses were. He never asked how the battle went, how many died, how many were wounded. People did not interest him.' It is perhaps fitting that he commanded the last Panjshir offensive, one which was more about honour and revenge than strategy, because his career would be shaped by a refusal to bow to the needs of statecraft. He was acerbic and intolerant of the politics which inevitably were part of the job of a senior military commander, leading him often into disputes with his government. He was briefly commander of the Transcaucasian Military District, in which role he was responsible for the bloody suppression of protests in Tbilisi, Georgia, in 1989. President Mikhail Gorbachev wanted him dismissed, but he had enough supporters in the high command that he was instead simply removed from line command, moving to head the General Staff Academy. In that position, he nurtured a new generation of military leaders, and in July 1996 briefly became defence minister under President Boris Yeltsin, but was dismissed because of his open dissatisfaction with what he felt was the government's neglect of the military.

Lieutenant-General Igor Rodionov, acerbic commander of the 40th Army between 1985 and 1986. (Mil.ru, CC BY 4.0)

Lieutenant-General Viktor Dubynin, another deputy commander who stepped up to head the 40th Army, had operational command of *Panjshir IX* but did not launch any offensives in his own right. Something of a technocrat, who did much to advance the Soviet

understanding of helicopter assaults and their integration into combined operations, it might have been interesting to see how he would have tackled a full-scale operation, but fortunately for everyone by then, the Soviets were moving towards withdrawal. As the last commander of the 40th Army, the main mission relating to the Panjshir for the young **Lieutenant-General Boris Gromov** – who served in Afghanistan three times (1980–82, 1985–86 and then from 1987) – was ensuring that Massoud did nothing to capitalize on the Soviet withdrawal, something he achieved with an artful mix of negotiation and a show of force.

THE DRA

It is easy to discount the role of the DRA and its commanders, and consider them the Soviets' unwilling, undisciplined and under-effective proxies. Often, to be sure, this was the case, but it is also worth noting that some DRA units proved loyal, competent and disciplined, and some of their commanders had a genuine impact on the Panjshir campaigns. One such was **Colonel Shahnawaz Tanai**, who commanded the 37th Commando Brigade, one of the DRA units that earned the respect of the Soviets and the fear of the rebels. He would have a price put on his head by 1984, when he was promoted to brigadier and given command of the Central Corps. In that capacity, he played a crucial role in leading the DRA component of *Panjshir VII*. He later would become minister of defence under Dr Mohammad Najibullah and then in effect his nemesis, as his attempted coup against him in 1990 failed, but critically weakened the Kabul regime.

This picture, on display in the Central Armed Forces Museum of Russia, demonstrates the kind of vapid propaganda spin the Soviet government tried to place on its invasion, with a cheery trio of (left to right) a DRA soldier, a Soviet soldier and a DRA workers' volunteer swapping news about the USSR with some receptive Afghans. (© Mark Galeotti)

OPPOSING FORCES

SOVIET 40TH ARMY

When the Soviets first invaded Afghanistan, they deployed only some 50,000 troops, planning in essence for a six-month show of force. The Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan (*OKSVA*), as the 40th Army was known, would soon have to get less limited as it became clear that this was going to be a lengthy and serious war, and across most of the decade of fighting it would number around 100,000 men: it peaked in 1985 at 108,700, of whom 73,600 were in combat units. These were a mix of regular units, largely made up of conscripts serving two-year national service terms, with professional officers, stiffened by *VDV* (paratrooper) air assault forces, as well as *Spetsnaz* special forces. These, too, tended to be made up of a majority of conscripts, but had a greater proportion of volunteers and also first pick of the draftees.

The basic manoeuvre unit was the regiment. Motor rifle regiments were mechanized forces with around 2,500 officers and men divided into three mechanized battalions, a tank battalion (typically with T-62 tanks as the more modern T-72s were not sent to Afghanistan, and the T-64s also used in *TurkVO* suffered too many engine problems), a battalion of 122mm 2S1 Gvozdika (Carnation) self-propelled guns or D-30 howitzers and a headquarters and support units. Some used wheeled BTR-60PB APCs, others the tracked BMP-1 IFV, with more modern BTR-70s and BMP-2s replacing them later in the war. Given the nature of the conflict, no tank regiments were attached to the 40th Army, but tank battalions, companies and platoons provided heavy support to most Soviet engagements.

An airborne regiment was a smaller, leaner unit, with 1,500 paratroopers in three battalions mounted in BMD air-droppable IFVs, plus headquarters and support units. *Spetsnaz* did not deploy in regiments, but in a detachment (*OSN*), the equivalent of a battalion, of variable strength between 180 and 410 commandos. There were also more

Paratroopers from the 345th Independent Guards Airborne Regiment, which played such a key role in the Panjshir; note their KLMK camouflage uniforms, still something of a rarity amongst Soviet troops and, along with their distinctive blue-striped undershirts, a mark of their elite status. (Mil.ru, CC BY 4.0)

SPETSNAZ IN AMBUSH, JUNE 1982

It was a mark of the lack of tough, reliable soldiers able to be deployed in small units away from senior officers' supervision that *Spetsnaz* special forces ended up used – wasted, they often felt – to man observation posts and strongpoints. In one case, in June 1982, a 15-man squad of the 31st Group of the 177th *OSN* under Lieutenant Yegiazarov was detached to a security post overlooking Rukha, because it was feared that the existing DRA garrison was too weak to hold it. On arriving, they realized the Afghan troops had made minimal efforts to fortify it, so they immediately set about establishing dugouts with interlocking fields of fire, building terraced defences, some of which were strewn with MZP 'tanglefoot' coiled-wire netting that, when released, uncoiled to cover a 5m x 10m area, making it virtually impassable. Just as well they had, because three days later, while they were distracted at dinner, the *mujahideen* launched an attack: suppressing fire from three DShK HMGs on nearby heights and a direct assault. Thanks to the rebels' usual fieldcraft, they had managed to get within 10m of the post, but were held up by the MZP, which gave the *Spetsnaz* time to rally and drive them off, killing four. The *mujahideen* had likely not anticipated the speed and decisiveness with which the *Spetsnaz* responded, used to dealing with DRA troops; the Soviets likewise had not realized how effective and stealthy the rebels could be.

specialized manoeuvre units such as heliborne assault-landing regiments and Commandant's Service (military police) forces, with the former especially well-suited to counter-insurgency operations and seeing much use in the Panjshir. In 1983, the 278th Commandant's Service Road Security Brigade was created specially to protect the Hairatan–Kabul highway, with three battalions (the 692nd, 1083rd and 1084th), and it repeatedly found itself engaging with raiding parties from the Panjshir Valley.

As befits a modern army primarily geared not for a scrappy counter-insurgency but an apocalyptic mechanized war on the plains of Europe or the Far East, the Soviets also leant heavily on artillery, with a dedicated artillery regiment based in Kabul and everything from the massive 152mm 2S3 Akatsiya (Acacia) self-propelled howitzer to multiple-launch rocket systems. In addition, the Soviets made full use of their effectively unchallenged control of the air. In the Panjshir, as elsewhere, Tu-16 strategic bombers operating out of bases in the USSR were used for devastating, but inaccurate, high-level carpet bombing, and Su-24 'Fencer' bombers and Su-17 and Su-22 fighter-bombers were deployed on many occasions.

However, the most effective close air support came from Mi-24 helicopter gunships – known as 'Satan's chariot' by the *mujahideen* – and Su-25 aircraft. The Mi-24 'flying tank' was a proven design, large and rugged, which went through several evolutions, especially thanks to experience in Afghanistan. Flying in pairs or larger units, they escorted convoys, supported attacks and conducted aerial hunter-killer patrols to interdict supply caravans and rebel movements. From 1981, the Su-25 also became a mainstay of Soviet operations. A well-armoured subsonic jet optimized for low-level close air support, the Su-25 mounts an internal 30mm GSh-30-2 autocannon and external hardpoints allowing it to carry everything from gun pods and

The BM-21 Grad (Hail) is a simple but effective 'Katyusha' 122mm multiple rocket system on a Ural truck base. This gives it considerable mobility, even in the rough terrain of Afghanistan, and while it can fire single rockets, it can also volley all 40 in 20 seconds. (Sergei Zhukov, TASS via Getty Images)

iron bombs to rockets and smart munitions. With Bagram Airfield just 7–10 minutes' flight time away from the Panjshir, airpower inevitably was a feature of every significant operation.

However, the *OKSVA* leant heavily on its air assets in general. Troops were moved by Mi-8 and Mi-6 transport helicopters and An-72 and Il-76 transports. An-26RR spy planes tracked rebel radio traffic, and Su-17M3R and An-30 photo-reconnaissance aircraft took detailed pictures of the battlespace. A few Mi-9 VZPU airborne command posts told them what to do. Mi-8MB Bissektrisa (Bisector) helicopters evacuated casualties from the battlefield, and An-26 Spasatel (Saviour) took them to hospital. When the worst came to the worst, An-12 'Black Tulips' flew the bodies of fallen soldiers back to the Motherland.

The Mi-24 'Hind' helicopter gunship was one of the most formidable assets in the Soviet arsenal, and most feared by the *mujahideen*. This is a later Mi-24P version, evident by the 30mm GSh-30-2K twin-barrel autocannon on the side of the fuselage instead of the turreted 12.7mm gatling under the nose of earlier versions. (Igor Dvurekov, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Coordinating all this was the 40th Army staff in Kabul, in close coordination with *TurkVO* (which still handled a certain share of its rear-area logistics and long-range bombing) and the General Staff in Moscow. There were also parallel command structures whose relations with the *OKSVA*'s military leaders were sometimes close, sometimes more antagonistic. Although the *Spetsnaz* were part of the *GRU*, the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff, in practice the units in Afghanistan were treated simply as additional ground troops at the 40th Army's disposal. The agent network of the *Agentura* (Agency), as the covert intelligence side of the *GRU* was and still is known, though, was a more complex issue. The head of *GRU* operations worked with the head of the 40th Army, but his

Sometimes out of cold-blooded calculation, sometimes a fiery desire for revenge, the Soviets often resorted to destroying whole villages with artillery fire and airstrikes. (Todd Huffman, CC BY 2.0)

formal subordination was to Moscow. The relationship of the *KGB* assets in country was even more complex and often antagonistic. The *KGB rezident* (or station chief) in Kabul was not formally subordinated to the commander of the 40th Army and often had his own agenda, although command and control of *KGB* forces such as the Border Troop motor-manoeuvre groups at Torghundi and Hairatan was effectively granted to the 40th Army.

Of course, an army is more that just the sum of its organization and equipment. The typical Soviet soldier was a conscript who had been given a relatively basic training and – in the early years of the war, at least – was not even told beforehand that he was going to Afghanistan. He could be brave and disciplined in defence of his friends and his Motherland, but an undeclared war on behalf of an unloved ally at a time when the USSR itself was mired in stagnation created the conditions in which indiscipline, drug- and alcohol-abuse and corruption all became rife. So, too, was looting and mistreatment of the civilian population, hardly something likely to endear them to the occupiers.

Nor were the officers particularly able to deal with the challenges of the war, especially in the absence of a professional NCO cadre. Trained for a mass, mechanized war where their role was essentially to execute the orders of the high command, they were often ill-prepared both personally and professionally for a chaotic counter-insurgency in which small-unit leaders were often forced to make decisions on their own, and manage disgruntled units in the field. As a sergeant of the 56th Independent Guards Air Assault Brigade who had fought in the very first Panjshir offensive admitted, 'It took us some time to get away from the inflexible tactics we had learned for war in Europe.'

In the Panjshir, given the importance of the theatre, this meant leaning all the more on the better-trained and better-motivated paratroopers, *Spetsnaz* and the like, as well as units such as the 180th Motor Rifle Regiment, which acquired a certain elite status. Even so, while especially the *Spetsnaz* could sometimes surprise them, the Afghans were struck by the relative lack of physical conditioning, outdoor skills and motivation of the *Shuravi*, the Soviets.

The war in Afghanistan devoured Soviets of every nationality, but especially because of their preponderance in the ranks of the paratroopers, who often bore the brunt of ground assaults, Russians, Belarussians and Ukrainians suffered particularly heavy casualties. This memorial to Alexander Surovtsov, who fell 'fulfilling his internationalist duty' in 1980, is in a museum in Kyiv, Ukraine. (© Mark Galeotti)

THE DRA

The armed forces of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan had a pretty terrible reputation with both the rebels they were fighting and the Soviets with whom they fought – and with generally good reason. Poor conditions of service, a lack of revolutionary zeal and often high casualties meant that morale was low and desertion rates high. Although on paper it was a substantial force of 12 divisions and additional brigades and regiments, in practice most of these units were usually at only a fraction

Although both Kabul and Moscow made much of such set-piece events to present the DRA's forces as enthused by the PDPA's revolution, the truth was very different, and the Soviet troops rarely trusted their Afghan 'comrades'. (Patrick ROBERT/Sygma via Getty Images)

of their establishment strength. Originally a force of over 90,000, for the period of the Soviet invasion it was actually at 25,000–40,000. When the 8th Infantry Division was called on to support the first Panjshir offensive, for example, it emerged that instead of its establishment strength of 9,000 soldiers, it actually was only 2,400 strong.

In many cases, DRA troops were assigned static security roles or used by the Soviets either as cannon-fodder at the front of an attack or else rear-area forces to mop up after. There were exceptions, though. The three Commando brigades, in particular, while actually more like regiments in size, nonetheless distinguished themselves throughout the war as tough and possessed of an *esprit de corps* that earned them the Soviets' respect. The Air Force was in a slightly better position, not least as it recruited more from the educated urban population (where pro-PDPA sentiments were more common) and also as it paid better. Nonetheless, pilots and maintenance crews alike were rarely well-trained, and the DRA largely had an ageing air fleet that was mostly ineffective in influencing the ground war.

There were also a series of security forces, notably the Interior Ministry's paramilitary *Sarandoy* ('Defenders of the Revolution') gendarmerie and Revolution Defence Group militia, as well as local youth and tribal militias. The *Sarandoy* played a minor role in the Panjshir, essentially as garrisons and patrols during those brief periods when Kabul could at least pretend to control parts of the valley plain. The others, though, were all generated from local supporters, whether PDPA activists (generally from the cities) or warlords won over through conviction or, more usually, payment. None of these appeared in the Panjshir, though, where Massoud's authority and pervasive mistrust of the PDPA ran deep.

In theory, the DRA had its own command structure through the defence ministry and General Staff in Kabul, although in practice the 40th Army was dominant. However, this relationship did not always work that well, with political tensions often evident both between the Soviets and the Afghans and also between adherents of the *Khalq* and *Parcham* wings of the PDPA. Coordination was also hampered by the relationship of the military with the

Beyond the army and *Sarandoy*, the PDPA also relied on its militias, such as these 'Young Defenders' from Helmand. While often enthusiastic, they were often badly trained and poorly equipped (note, for example, the World War II-vintage PPSh-41 SMG held by the woman on the right). In any case, the PDPA never had any meaningful support in the Panjshir, even in its towns. (Georgy Nadezhdin/TASS via Getty Images)

Interior Ministry and also the powerful *KhAD* political police, an agency that in its own frequently brutal way nonetheless was often able to gather good operationable intelligence and also play an active role in the struggle through a campaign of assassination, subversion and 'false flag' missions conducted by *KhAD* teams masquerading as *mujahideen*.

THE PANJSHIR FRONT

Given that their enemies were numerous and possessed of massive firepower, but often little knowledge of how best to use it and how to turn it into political capital, the rebel challenge was to create structures able to raise and maintain fighting forces while building a strong local base of support. Massoud proved as capable in managing this administrative and state-building challenge as the military one.

The Panjshir Front was quite distinctive amongst elements of *Jamiat-e Islami* for the way Massoud sought to get beyond reliance on traditional clan leaders and village elders and instead create a working administrative model. He did not try to challenge those existing power structures, and would make a point of holding consultative gatherings, *shuras*, to maintain their support. This also allowed him later to more easily extend his authority across Parwan Province and to adjacent ones – Kunduz, Baghlan, Takhar and Kapisa – because he was not seen as tied too directly to the Panjshir clans. While committees were established to address administrative matters, such as law and education, as well as a council of *ulema* (religious scholars), the military command was firmly in his hands, through a series of district commands.

A trio of rebel fighters in traditional garb, from 1985. Note the heterogenous mix of weapons: one .303-cal. Short Magazine Lee-Enfield and two 7.62mm AK-47s. For a conventional army, the mix of calibres (especially once the rebels also began capturing 5.45mm AK-74s from the Soviets) would have been a nightmare, but the Afghans' traditions of village gunsmithing and handloading helped alleviate the problem. (Erwin Lux, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Among the resources of the Panjshir were precious minerals, including emeralds and this fine lapis lazuli. Massoud would use a tax on this industry as a vital means of raising funds for his war – and reducing dependence on outside sponsors. (Robert Nickelsberg/Getty Images)

Massoud's pursuit of a well-organized rebel movement meant that he had to mobilize all the resources available to him. Panjshir's valuable sources of silver and gemstones proved an important and often overlooked asset, especially as it minimized his dependence on aid via Pakistan that could be intercepted either by the Soviets or rival rebels – notably Gulbuddin Hekmatyar – or else used by Islamabad as a potential instrument of influence and control.

Although many of the mines had already been tapped out, a small-scale silver extraction survived in the lower valley, with most of the output being sold to craftsmen in the nearby Andarab Valley, to be worked into jewellery. (Exhausted silver mines also provided useful hollows that could then become observation posts, dugouts and storage caverns.) More importantly, the upper parts of the valley had significant deposits of emeralds, with anything between 20 and 40 mines, often small, family ventures, but in a few instances larger and more commercial operations which benefited from foreign equipment and even expertise. A small proportion of the stones were polished and cut locally, often to be worked into jewellery, but most were smuggled across the border into Pakistan to be processed and sold around the world. The Front levied a 20 per cent tax on these industries, as well as on the mining of lapis lazuli, which together earned it an income that has been estimated as anything from $2–$10 million a year (large enough that in June 1981, the Soviets even tried launching high-level bombing raids against the mines, to little effect). This was added to the existing revenues from taxing the harvest and also 5 per cent of the earnings of traders and artisans as well as those civil servants still somehow working in territories controlled by the Front and being paid by Kabul.

Over time, the Panjshir Front would establish 22 bases in the valley and in the steep, gravelly side valleys, which were often used as havens during the periodic Soviet-led offensives. Around this, he built a guerrilla force that was divided into the *grup-i-mutaharek*, mobile group, also known as a *motorak*, and local self-defence forces.

The *motoraks* were the elite, units of up to a hundred full-time rebels able to operate for days or even weeks in the field, including outside the

Bujeiro

***MUJAHIDEEN* AMBUSH A GOVERNMENT SUPPLY CONVOY, PANJSHIR PASS, AUGUST 1979 (PP. 28–29)**

This scene shows *mujahideen* springing an ambush on a government supply convoy at the mouth of the Panjshir Pass, just past Gulbahar. One of the ageing Soviet-built ZIL-157 trucks (**1**) is on fire, its civilian driver dead, and the lead security element in an equally-old BTR-152 APC (**2**) has been caught by surprise. The open-topped BTR-152 was essentially an armoured truck, and the Soviets had stopped building it in 1959; it was typical of the kind of dated equipment the DRA forces were fielding. While they start to return fire with their 7.62mm AK-47 rifles (**3**) and the vehicle's 12.7mm DShK HMG (**4**), a second element of rebels, led by a man with his trusty .303 Lee-Enfield rifle (**5**), is already almost amongst them. Note the ammunition charger clips on his waistcoat.

These convoys were essential to the maintenance of even the limited garrisons in the valley, and they represented a constant vulnerability for the government forces and an opportunity for the rebels. Such small-scale attacks were crucial to limiting Kabul's capacity to exert its authority in the Panjshir and to demonstrating Massoud's primacy with the local population, and even before they had bought, stolen and looted more modern weapons, the rebels were able to use the rough terrain to their advantage. Furthermore, the more dated bolt-action rifles they used were often much better suited to the kind of long-range attacks and opportunistic sniping that was such a part of the skirmishes in the Panjshir. The Lee-Enfield, for example, has an effective range of some 500m, while the AK-47's range is at most 350m), and that presupposes equivalent marksmanship; the rebels were generally country-raised with a weapon since childhood, while most government troops were poorly trained conscripts. Not only did government troops have poorer marksmanship, they also suffered from terrible fire discipline, often blazing away indiscriminately on full auto and exhausting their ammunition to little actual effect.

valley, sometimes as far as 100km away. By 1982, there were perhaps six in existence, and despite fluctuations because of casualties from the offensives and other combat operations, by the time of the Soviet withdrawal there were perhaps 12, the largest of which were 400–500 strong.

Motoraks were typically divided into units of around 30 fighters, who would operate in three ten-man sections. They were originally armed with whatever was to hand, whether an AK-47 captured from the government (or bought on the very active black market), a .303 rifle or even, in extreme cases, the occasional hand-made muzzle-loading *jezail* (long musket) handed down the generations since the previous century. In quite quick order, though, they became increasingly well armed and standardized. A group would generally have a machine gun (usually a 7.62mm PK) and two RPG-7 rocket-propelled grenade launchers, with the rest carrying AK-47s and AKM-47s. Over time, SVD sniper rifles and 5.45mm AK-74s would supplement their arsenal as they bought or captured them from Soviet troops.

The locals (*mahalli*) were instead charged with defending their home villages, with the best and most enthusiastic of them being formed into units called *grup-i zarbati* (shock troops), sometimes also known as *zabets*. These semi-mobile groups acted as reserve forces for the defence of an area covering a number of villages. The 25-or-so *zabets* typically numbered no more than 50–60 men and were largely made up of part-time volunteers. Nonetheless, their skills and determination were often as impressive as those of the *motoraks*, and they operated with formidable knowledge of their neighbourhoods.

Although Massoud never received the same scale of foreign backing as some other *mujahideen* leaders (see *Foreign Aid* box), nonetheless, over time the Panjshir Front did benefit not only from financial aid but also direct supplies of foreign-sourced kit. Later, this would extend to the fabled (if over-hyped) Stinger surface-to-air missile, but the main weapons which reached

A *mujahideen* holding a Soviet-made SA-7 Strela-2M surface-to-air missile launcher, probably stolen or bought from Afghan Army stocks, as the Soviets soon withdrew them from the 40th Army once they had secured the DRA's Air Force. Its performance against Soviet jets was poor, but it was effective against helicopters, especially before counter-measures were introduced, and certainly left the invaders less confident of their control of the skies over the Panjshir. (US DOD/Public Domain)

FOREIGN AID

Since 1979, Washington had been directly supporting the rebels, seeing in their struggle an invaluable opportunity to mire Moscow in an unpopular and increasingly unwinnable war – essentially, their own Vietnam. Dubbed Operation *Cyclone*, this became one of the CIA's most expensive covert operations ever. From a mere $695,000 in 1979, the amount of assistance had reached a value of just under $30 million in 1980, and a total of $400 million by the end of 1984. In 1985 alone, another $250 million was spent, and in April of that year, in National Security Directive 166, US president Ronald Reagan promised $470 million in 1986 and another $630 million in 1987. This was essentially for military support for the rebel campaign – aid to the refugees via the US Agency for International Development totalled just $40 million by 1988. Much of it was spent on Soviet-pattern weapons, bought from and often made in Egypt and China.

However, Washington was by no means the only donor: from the first, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran all backed their own favoured rebel groups – giving rise to all kinds of proxy struggles between them – while China would later also participate, seeing an opportunity to paint the Soviets as 'imperialists' and also cosy up to their regional ally, Pakistan. The result was a steady flow of weapons, supplies and also technical assistance, which in 1986 included first British-built Blowpipe man-portable surface-to-air missiles, and then US Stingers.

Only a small portion of this assistance went to the Panjshir, though. Massoud had the kind of presence and record that often won him enthusiastic supporters in the West. The irony, though, is that of the various foreign powers actively supporting the *mujahideen* on the ground, only Britain considered him a special priority. From 1982, the Secret Intelligence Service – MI6 – regularly sent liaison officers to meet with him, Special Air Service (SAS) military instructors to support his forces, as well as direct financial and military assistance (including advanced radios intended to prevent Soviet eavesdropping) and, most unusually, intelligence on Soviet plans gleaned from MI6's own sources as well as the communications intercepts from GCHQ, the UK's electronic intelligence agency.

Despite the outspoken advocacy of several figures in the State Department and CIA, the USA considered Panjshir not to be the crucial battleground and Massoud not their best option, especially after his 1983 truce with the Soviets, that led to some even improbably suggesting he had been a Kremlin asset all along. Massoud did get assistance under National Security Directive 166, but only relatively small amounts. This also reflected Washington's preference for working through Pakistan, which allowed the government in Islamabad – and especially ISI – to funnel assistance predominantly to the groups it favoured, notably Hekmatyar's.

After all, the other main outside players – Pakistan, China and Saudi Arabia – all considered Massoud too independent and too moderate for their tastes. Nor was Rabbani willing or able to intervene. Not only was he dependent on Islamabad for his own security, but he refused to treat Massoud any differently from any other field commander, regardless of the fact that his Panjshir Front was larger, more successful and also more fiercely embattled than most. Whether this was out of even-handedness, a need to keep *Jamiat-e Islami* together or, as some have suggested, jealousy of his former acolyte, this certainly prevented Massoud from getting the kind of support that could have made a real difference on the battlefield.

the Panjshir's defenders included stocks of Chinese and Egyptian AK-47s, Chinese Type 63 12-tube 107mm multiple rocket launchers, Italian Tecnovar and Valsella 'plastic' anti-tank and anti-personnel mines, as well as medical and communications equipment.

The rebels' operations became heavily dependent on their continued supply of modern and heavy weapons from abroad, largely brought in via Pakistan. The convoys carrying them, along with medical supplies, were a perennial target for Soviet special forces. Here, the Soviets show off heavy machine guns, rocket launchers and other weapons, seized in a raid by a patrol from the 350th Guards Airborne Regiment. (Sergei Novikov, CC BY-SA 3.0)

OPPOSING PLANS

In broad terms, Massoud's rebels were often able to take the offensive, especially when it came to launching raids on the Salang Pass and the crucial highway to Kabul. However, when it comes specifically to the Panjshir offensives, these were all initiated by the Soviets – sometimes under pressure from the DRA regime – and so the struggle was between their plans and Massoud's efforts to foil them, often not so much by direct opposition but by changing the nature of the conflict.

THE SOVIETS/DRA

There were distinct differences in the scale, cause and tactical circumstances of each of the nine Panjshir offensives. However, there were also certain common objectives and approaches. Contrary to some claims, they never sought to depopulate the valley or the like – if that had been the objective, it would have been rather easier than trying to fight the rebels. Rather, it was to neutralize Massoud and the Panjshir Front, to prevent them from being a political threat by standing as a symbol of successful defiance and also a military one, capable of raiding Bagram, Kabul and the highway from Hairatan. At the same time, though, it was to do these without excessive demands on the forces and resources in-country: the *OKSVA* had many fronts on which to fight, and Moscow had only a limited willingness to escalate. To this end, the offensives would all share certain characteristics.

Soviet and DRA forces in action. Note the tyre on the turret of the BTR-60 APC, a common practice in Afghanistan both to ensure a spare was available and also to provide some minimal extra protection to the thin-skinned vehicle. (Viktor Budan/TASS via Getty Images)

Feints and operational security

Massoud had too extensive a network of intelligence-gathering assets – from sympathizers in Kabul to locals in the nearby towns who would pass on their observations – ever not to know that an offensive was being prepared. The best that could be done was to try to maintain operational security and attempting misdirection. The first quickly came to mean keeping Afghans out of the planning process for as long as possible, something which traded some security for local knowledge and also DRA/Soviet amity.

Soldiers of the 11th Separate Air Assault Brigade prepare to board an Mi-8 transport helicopter. Note the 'Panama' hats, characteristic of many Soviet troops in Afghanistan. (Mil.ru, CC BY 4.0)

The second typically involved launching initial feints towards the Salang or other nearby objectives, although in practice this rarely proved especially successful.

Preparatory bombardments

Artillery and airpower was almost invariably used to deliver preparatory fires, which could last hours or even days. The intention was to disrupt the rebels, forcing them to withdraw to caves and bunkers, and also physically to destroy defensive infrastructure. In practice, it signalled an impending attack and rarely made a serious positive contribution. The rebels were too experienced and mobile not to be able to reoccupy their positions once the ground attack started, and the real victims were the civilians, driven from their homes, often lacking anywhere to flee, and seeing their homes and livelihoods destroyed. This not only increased their defiance, it also created a pool of dispossessed young men whose only employment opportunity was as a guerrilla.

Landing blocking forces by helicopters

The Soviets were well aware that the challenge with guerrillas is not outgunning them but outmanoeuvring them, preventing them from being able to disperse and deny their conventional enemies the chance to deliver a serious blow. The Soviet-Afghan War was when they really learned the utility of the helicopter in such conflicts and made extensive use of them for vertical envelopment, dropping troops behind and to the flanks of the so-called 'green zones' where rebels concentrated, to block their withdrawal and engage them from unexpected directions. The *mujahideen* came to expect this tactic and had the benefit of prepared escape routes and local knowledge, but nonetheless this proved one of the more successful of Soviet tactical choices.

Mass mechanized thrusts

The heart of most offensives was a mechanized thrust up the relatively flat Panjshir Valley plain, at least for the first two-thirds or so, before it became too narrow, rocky and often snowbound for such forces. This kind of advance exposed the attackers to mines, ambushes and the like and lacked subtlety, to say the least. It was, however, the only option to push rebels away from the populated lowlands and hopefully trap them against the blocking forces.

Establishing local garrisons

From the first, the Soviets wanted to maintain garrisons inside the Panjshir – especially at Rukha, but ideally beyond it – both as symbols of Kabul's authority in the region and also as a base for forces able to patrol across the valley floor, to deter and interdict rebel movements. This was a sensible plan, but depended heavily on the forces there being motivated, aggressive and

adequate, and the only time all three characteristics were present was generally when they assigned Soviet troops to the mission rather than DRA security forces. Even then, the other side of the coin is that such garrisons became constant targets, and the *mujahideen* could provoke responses into prepared ambushes by escalating their attacks on these vulnerable strongpoints.

In practice, the Soviet approach replicated the wider pattern of the war. Massoud could not defeat them in a straightforward battle – all but one of the offensives, to greater or lesser degree, achieved their stated objectives. But this did not defeat Massoud, either – he and his organization survived and could always rebuild, stronger than ever, and the myth of the Lion of Panjshir only grew with each offensive weathered.

THE REBELS

In the early years of the war, the priority was survival against periodic Soviet/DRA attacks and asserting unified control over the Panjshir. Nonetheless, even by 1982, while weathering the regular offensives, Massoud was elaborating and working on a strategic plan that would have been familiar to that of many anti-imperialist guerrillas. First, he had to establish a local resistance movement able to generate and capitalize upon popular support. Second, this movement's strategic base – the Panjshir – had to be defended and used as a platform from which to launch wider attacks, not least to demonstrate political leadership. These attacks, and alliances with other communities and rebel groups, could then be leveraged for a shift to constructing a more conventional military force able to contest control of key areas of northern Afghanistan. This would eventually lead to a final phase, a national offensive against the Kabul regime.

In terms of actual operations, both offensive and defensive, several main tactical approaches emerged. Again, they would be familiar to most insurgent armies, especially those operating in mountainous terrain, but it is worth noting that the Afghans in general, and Massoud's Panjshir Front

A sense of the barrenness of the Panjshir Valley is given by this picture of sheep being driven to pasture in late spring. (USAF/Master Sgt. Michael O'Connor, Public Domain)

in particular, demonstrated considerable imagination and learnt well how to respond to the Soviets' own evolving repertoire. As Lieutenant-General Viktor Yermakov, one of the commanders of the 40th Army, recalled in an interview to defence ministry newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda* in 2019:

> The Afghans masterfully organized ambushes, building a multi-tiered fire system in the mountains, constantly changing their tactics, paying great attention to surprise and mobility. Their ingenuity was amazing! *Mujahideen* built such firing points that sometimes there was nothing that could be done to smoke them out. Even volumetric explosion [thermobaric] bombs did not always help.

Supply-line raids

The proximity of the Salang Pass and the highway to Kabul meant that the Panjshir *mujahideen* could and did often launch raids on these crucial lines of communication. The aim was not only to deny their enemies vital supplies and tie up large numbers of troops on security duties, but also to make a powerful statement of the Panjshir Front's capacity to damage their enemy. After all, the impacts were also noted by ordinary Afghans, such as the times raids caused fuel shortages in Kabul.

A posed shot of rebels with a 14.5mm ZPU HMG – especially in the early days of the war, such weapons were their only real anti-aircraft defences. (EPU FILES/AFP via Getty Images)

Disperse and regroup

A crucial skill of the guerrilla commander is to be able to disperse his force rapidly in the face of a superior enemy operating on its terms, but then also reconcentrate those forces equally quickly to take advantage of a tactical opportunity. Fighting on their own ground, and informed by a network of local supporters and observers, Massoud's forces were extremely mobile and flexible, on foot and horseback in the earlier years, increasingly supplementing this with motorbikes, jeeps, light trucks and even captured APCs.

Ambushes

The quintessential guerrilla tactic, the ambush, was central to the *mujahideen* response to offensives in the Panjshir. Often these involved the use of mines and obstacles to channel and delay attacks, while rebels raked their targets with guns and rockets. Children and civilians would often be used as spotters. Later, they even began setting what could be called 'air ambushes', trying to lure helicopters into prepared killing grounds where they had emplaced AA guns (typically DShK HMGs or twin-barrel 14.5mm ZPU-2s) or, later, some of their scarce surface-to-air missiles. This all required considerable ingenuity, organization and above all planning, especially given that the Soviets came to expect ambushes. Military intelligence officer Lieutenant-Colonel Anatoly Tkachyov later reminisced:

It is a mark of Massoud's status as a hero of Afghan independence that his portrait flanks Afghan Defence Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak as he addresses a *shura* in 2010. (US Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class David Quillen, Public Domain)

> In the rocks, they built weapons positions and hides for teams of fighters, created nodes for resistance and a multi-tier defence with skilfully laid out fields of fire. Clefts in rocks, caves, mountain gorges, burrows and heights had positions for anti-aircraft mounts and heavy machine guns. In the upper reaches of the gorges, caches were prepared in advance in caves for sheltering people, weapons depots, ammunition and food.

Harassment

As well as set-piece raids, the rebels ensured that Soviet and DRA patrols and garrisons in the Panjshir faced a constant, unpredictable threat, from sniping, sabotage and mortar fire. The intent was to demoralize and disrupt as much as anything else; while Soviet forces were sometimes provoked into reprisals against locals (which made them all the more unpopular) or armed responses (which sometimes proved successful, but more often were either futile or led into ambushes), the DRA units tended either to shelter in place, neutralizing them, or else making them all the more susceptible to mutiny, defection and desertion.

Controlling the valley

After all, a key element of Massoud's strategy was to retain the Panjshir as a haven for his military machine but also a base for his political one. Every time the regime or 40th Army established positions in the valley, it became a priority to squeeze them out, through direct offensives or, more often, making them untenable by raiding their supply lines and denying them egress from their cantonments. Beyond just ensuring that they could not prevent the free movement of his forces, this was crucial for Massoud's political message, that there was a viable Islamic statelet in the Panjshir, free from the PDPA's rule.

THE CAMPAIGN

Western analyses have identified nine distinct offensives, and although the Soviets did not follow this same approach – they tended to label operations by date or codename, and rolled some offensives together into longer, on-and-off periods of particular combat – this has increasingly been adopted by Russian scholars and even participants.

The Nine Offensives

Offensive	Dates	Soviet/DRA Forces	Panjshir Front forces
Panjshir I	9–12 April 1980	1,000	200
Panjshir II	28 August–20 September 1980	1,100	500
Panjshir III	8–18 November 1980	900	400
Panjshir IV	6–11 September 1981	2,000	2,200
Panjshir V	16 May–1 June 1982	12,000	4,000
Panjshir VI	25 August–10 September 1982	12,000	4,000
Panjshir VII	19 April–5 May 1984	15,000	3,600
Panjshir VIII	5–16 September 1984	7,000	3,700
Panjshir IX	16 June–16 July 1985	11,000	4,400

Note: Numbers are approximate. Rebel totals only include those forces actively engaged in the valley, not the total size of the Panjshir Front at the time.

PANJSHIR I, APRIL 1980: FIRST BLOOD

From the very first, the Soviet commanders realized that Massoud's forces in the valley represented a threat to the Hairatan–Kabul highway, after they had launched attacks on convoys near Jabal-os-Saraj and sent raiding parties into the Salang Pass along the Shutul River, a tributary of the Panjshir. A battalion of the DRA's 8th Infantry Division was notionally responsible for controlling the valley, from a base in the small town of Rukha, but it was too small, too demoralized and too badly maintained to do anything of the sort, and the assumption amongst the Soviets was that it had an informal understanding with the rebels, that they would be left alone so long as they stayed in their cantonment and did nothing to challenge Massoud's effective control of the Panjshir.

The decision was made to reassert Kabul's control over the valley. A tactical group under Lieutenant-General Leonid Pechevoy, deputy commander of the 40th Army, was assembled at Jabal-os-Saraj, comprising around a thousand troops in five battalions: three Soviet (including two

Travellers through Panjshir have commented on the region's stark beauty. Here, some houses look out onto the river. (Teddy Wade, US Army/ Public Domain)

of paratroopers) and two DRA, and support elements including a battery of 2S5 Giatsint 152mm self-propelled guns and a dozen helicopters. The objective was the village of Pas-e Shah-e Mardan, known to be Massoud's headquarters.

One task force of two battalions (one DRA battalion, and the Soviet 4th Air Assault Battalion – the first Soviet unit that had crossed the border overland into Afghanistan on 25 December 1979) would assemble at the village of Anawa. It would seek to strike fast to Pas-e Shah-e Mardan, bypassing Rukha and avoiding being bogged down in fighting on the way as far as possible. Having reached its objective, the force would destroy the village after seizing any captives or information deemed of intelligence value, and then withdraw. Meanwhile, the remaining forces would be making a more measured advance up the valley, mopping up remaining pockets of resistance and seizing Bazarak, the local administrative capital. Once the advance guard had rejoined the main force, it would withdraw, leaving the garrison from the DRA's 8th Infantry Division at Rukha with, it was hoped, new zeal and authority.

The operation began at 0500hrs on 9 April, and by noon the next day, the vanguard had reached Pas-e Shah-e Mardan. Captain Leonid Khabarov of the 4th Air Assault Battalion recalled that dash:

***PANJSHIR I*: ATTACKERS' ORBAT**

DRA
4th Infantry Battalion (8th Infantry Division)
5th Infantry Battalion (8th Infantry Division)
SOVIET
4th Air Assault Battalion (56th Independent Guards Air Assault Brigade)
Motor Rifle Battalion (177th Motor Rifle Regiment 108th Motor Rifle Division)
2nd Airborne Battalion (345th Independent Guards Airborne Regiment)
Motor Rifle Company (177th Regiment)
Engineer-Sapper Platoon
Tank Platoon (177th Regiment)
Self-Propelled Artillery Battery (1074th Artillery Regiment, 108th Motor Rifle Division)
262nd Independent Helicopter Squadron (280th Independent Helicopter Regiment)

DRA troops manhandling an artillery piece during training. Note the very variable shade of their uniforms, a product of the decidedly shoddy nature of the manufacturing process. (Lev Porter/TASS via Getty Images)

> It was necessary to move fast. To go in like a knife into butter … We went along roads and goat paths. In our [armoured vehicles] as much as possible. Fights, fights. They managed to blow the bridges up, but we had bridge spacers – and continued forward.

There was no road beyond the village that could comfortably take Soviet combat vehicles, even the GAZ and UAZ jeeps and light trucks that supplemented the paratroopers' tracked BMD personnel carriers, so Khabarov's paratroopers dismounted and continued up it until noon the next day, when they were ordered to return to the village for a general withdrawal. Meanwhile, the main force had reached Rukha, and elements of the 2nd Airborne Battalion had pursued fleeing rebels into the side valley of the Hazara River, the Panjshir's southern tributary. Meanwhile, other soldiers from the 345th Independent Guards Airborne Regiment – including its 9th Company under Lieutenant Valery Vostrotin, which had played a key role in *Storm-333* – secured the mouth of the valley. By 12 April, the operation was over.

The rebels had been forewarned of the attack by sympathizers in Anawa (it was very rare that the Kabul forces could achieve strategic surprise), but were not ready to resist a substantial mechanized attack, especially as the Soviets also used helicopters to lift some elements of the 4th Battalion past Rukha. They withdrew up the valley and, especially, into the side valleys. However, they also mined the road up the valley, and harassed the attackers with sniper fire and ambushes, especially at night.

Both sides claimed victory. The Soviets pointed to the fulfilment of their operational goals, and claimed that Massoud had been wounded in the attack, his force dispersed. The rebels likewise claimed to have inflicted severe casualties on the attackers, downing no fewer than ten helicopters, and losing just four men. These last claims are highly dubious, but the point is that the rebels did not seek to confront the attackers on their own terms, rather to withdraw in good order and then regroup afterwards. After all, while the

EARLY DOUBTS

Even at this early stage, Soviet officers from the most junior ranks began to have serious doubts about the loyalty and efficacy of their DRA 'comrades'. During *Panjshir I*, they made a poor showing, badly equipped but above all frequently careless, unprofessional and simply unwilling to fight. Lieutenant Vostrotin noted that the Afghan soldiers meant to support his company generally gave up fighting after less than half an hour, so that the Soviet paratroopers had to pick up the slack – and increasingly would not even bother assigning them significant missions. Likewise, 'Alexei K.', a soldier of the 177th Regiment who had served alongside the DRA 8th Infantry Division forces, later reminisced to me that 'the ones who could fight didn't want to be there; the ones who were OK with being there didn't know how to fight'. Before the Soviets formally handed Rukha back to the Afghans, Alexei said that at night his commanders would park their vehicles in such a way as to block the exit routes, fearing mass desertions.

Soviet troops in field dress and DRA officers mingle as the 40th Army prepares to withdraw. (Georgy Nadezhdin/TASS via Getty Images)

Soviets claimed they numbered up to a thousand, the rebels themselves say there were only some 200 real fighters, and beyond some captured AK-47s and Chinese Type 56 copies, most were armed with ageing bolt-action rifles, typically the .303 Short Magazine Lee-Enfield. Despite Moscow's claims, it is clear that Massoud's organization was not seriously affected – indeed, there would be two further Panjshir offensives later that year. As for the garrison in Rukha, attempts to leave such forces in the Panjshir, especially of Afghan troops, would never prove successful in the long term. Beset with periodic attacks, from sniping to mortar fire, and sapped by desertion, its miserable soldiers simply hunkered down in their cantonment rather than dominating the upper valley, as had been planned.

PANJSHIR II, AUGUST 1980: RELIEVING RUKHA

The position of the garrison in Rukha was increasingly untenable, and also a cause of tension between the 40th Army command and their DRA counterparts: the Afghans felt, not without reason, that their men had been abandoned in hostile territory, the Soviets by contrast were exasperated that attacks from the Panjshir were undiminished.

On 28 August 1980, a new operation was launched that involved a combined DRA and Soviet force of just over a thousand soldiers drawn largely from the Soviet 108th Division and the DRA's 10th Brigade and 444th Commando Battalion. The aim was to clear the lower and central valley. Beyond simply relieving Rukha and reinforcing the garrison there, it was intended as both a show of force to overawe the locals and also a military mission to clear rebel positions from which they had been harassing the cantonment. Although helicopters had been used to land scouts in the first operation and evacuate the wounded – including Captain Khabarov, who almost lost his hand to a machine-gun bullet – for the first time in this operation they were used for combat landings of Soviet paratroopers from the 345th Independent Guards Airborne Regiment, who seized heights above Rukha to chase off rebels who had been using them for sporadic mortar attacks on the garrison.

The operation lasted three weeks, and once again the rebels dispersed before the attacks and relied on mines, ambushes, sniping and similar

SOVIET

Panjshir I

A. 4th Air Assault Battalion and DRA force

Panjshir II:

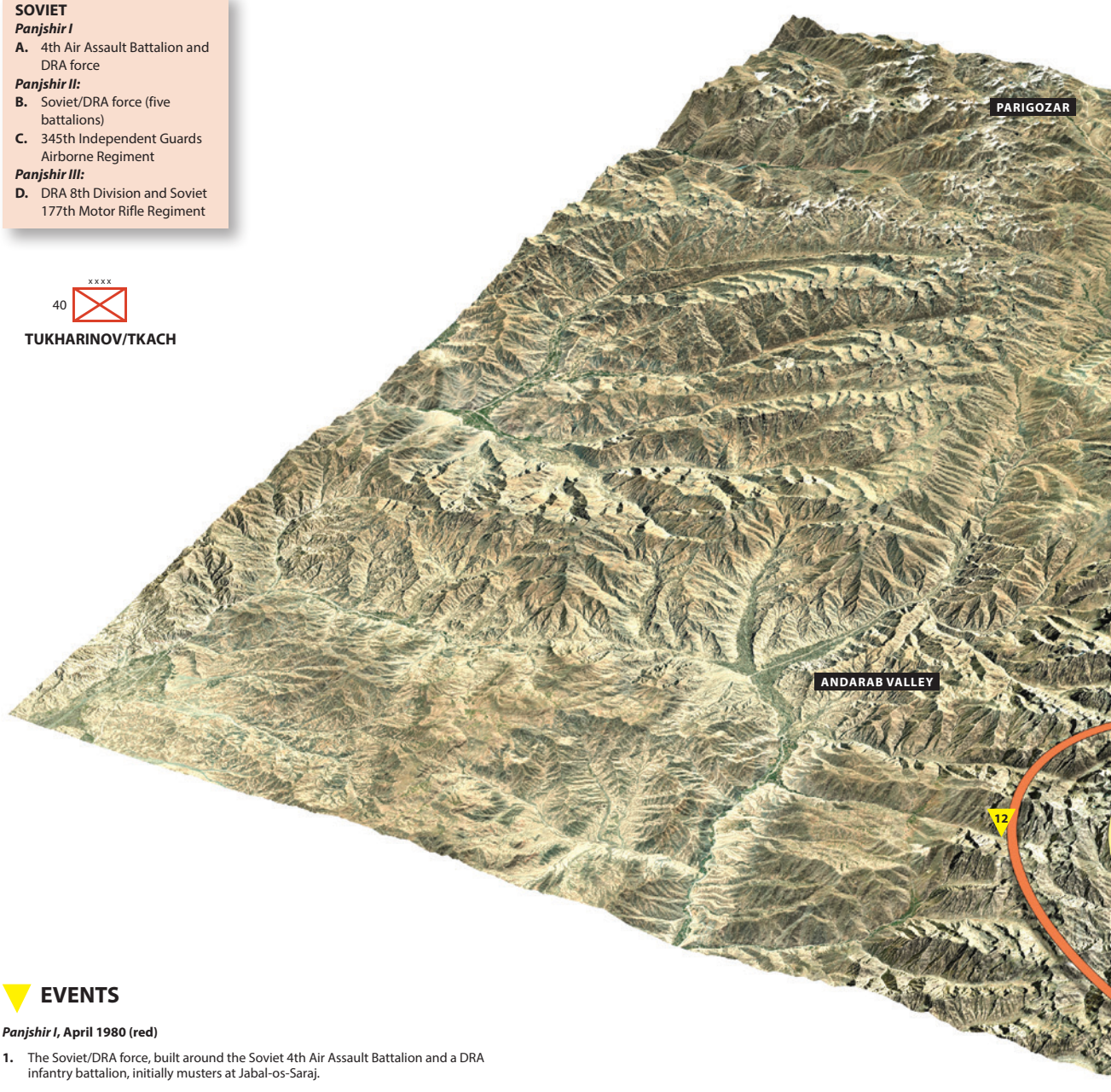
B. Soviet/DRA force (five battalions)

C. 345th Independent Guards Airborne Regiment

Panjshir III:

D. DRA 8th Division and Soviet 177th Motor Rifle Regiment

TUKHARINOV/TKACH



EVENTS

***Panjshir I*, April 1980 (red)**

1. The Soviet/DRA force, built around the Soviet 4th Air Assault Battalion and a DRA infantry battalion, initially musters at Jabal-os-Saraj.
2. It moves to Anawa and prepares for the next stage; at present, neither force is used to operating together or in valley conditions.
3. 9 April: The assault force drives for Pas-e Shah-e Mardan, seizing the village and Massoud's headquarters the next day.
4. The advance force then withdraws back down the valley, rejoining the main force at Rukha.
5. The main force advances to and seizes Bazarak, and then largely withdraws to Rukha.

***Panjshir II*, August 1980 (yellow)**

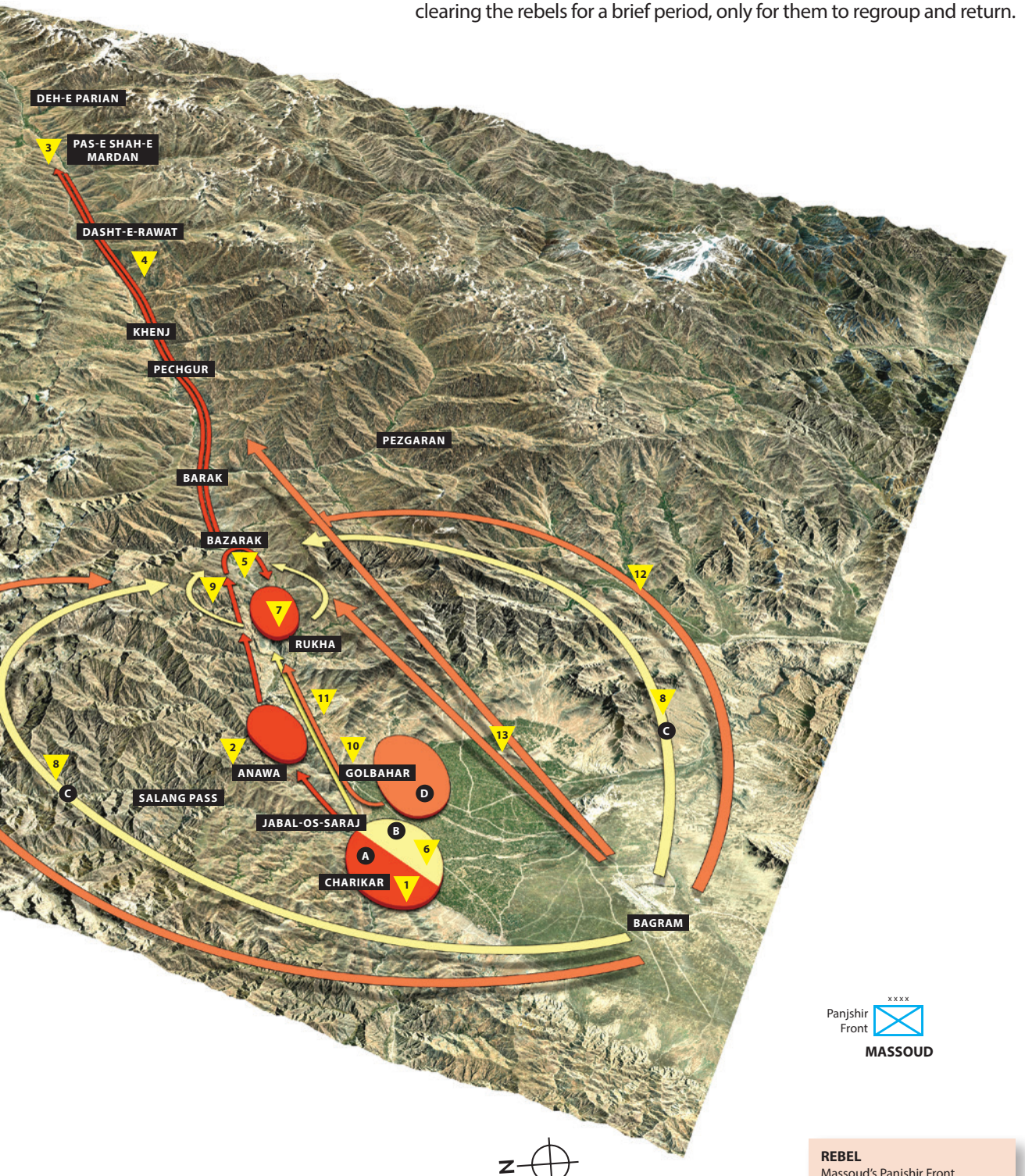
6. The Soviet/DRA force of five battalions musters at Jabal-os-Saraj.
7. 28 August: The force advances to Rukha to relieve the garrison there.
8. Meanwhile, small heliborne forces from the 345th Independent Guards Airborne Regiment are deployed from Bagram to the surrounding heights.
9. Patrols in force clear the area around Rukha.

***Panjshir III*, November 1980 (orange)**

10. The Soviet/DRA force drawn largely from the DRA's 8th Division and the Soviet 177th Motor Rifle Regiment, musters at Golbahar.
11. 8 November: The force advances to Rukha with a supply column for the garrison there.
12. Helicopter operations are mounted from Bagram to secure the heights overlooking Rukha as the attackers again try to clear rebels from the lower valley floor.
13. Airstrikes by Soviet Su-17s (and a few sorties by DRA Il-28 bombers) flown out of Bagram hit targets beyond Rukha.

THE 1980 OFFENSIVES: *PANJSHIR I–III*

The first three Soviet offensives were in many ways variations on the same theme, underlying the extent to which their efforts in the Panjshir Valley tended to be at best temporary successes, clearing the rebels for a brief period, only for them to regroup and return.



Panjshir Front
xxxx
MASSOUD

REBEL
Massoud's Panjshir Front

Note: The base map shows an area of 138km x 115km.

means of harassing their less mobile enemies, drawing on their detailed knowledge of the local terrain and also on the intelligence passed them by the local population. There were no major engagements, and much of the time the attackers found themselves conducting futile patrols in force, with no more contact than an occasional bit of sniping. In the usual way, both sides claimed victory. The *mujahideen* admitted to 25 casualties and claimed to have inflicted 500 casualties on the attackers and shot down more helicopters. Conversely, Soviet accounts put the casualty rate at around 200 dead and wounded on each side. Whatever the truth – which was somewhere in between – in practice, the rebels won by not losing.

PANJSHIR III, NOVEMBER 1980: RETURNING TO RUKHA

Through 1980, Massoud's Panjshir Front had not only been able to weather DRA and Soviet attacks, it had also attracted more recruits, both locals inspired by their example and Afghans attracted by Massoud's growing reputation, as well as becoming more organized and better armed. Raids, defections and also some judicious black market purchases from corrupt soldiers had allowed the rebels to begin to expand their arsenals with mortars and even a few antiquated artillery pieces.

These were put to good effect in keeping up the pressure on Rukha, which by September was essentially besieged. Meanwhile, the *mujahideen* continued to launch ambushes not only within the Panjshir, but beyond it (see *Ambush at the Abdullah-e Burj Bridge*). In November, fearing that the cold Afghan winter would make it even harder to resupply the garrison, a third operation was launched.

On 8 November, motorized infantry from the DRA's 8th Division, accompanied by truckloads of supplies, were escorted to Rukha by the tanks and BMP IFVs of the Soviets' 177th Motor Rifle Regiment. As they

A runway break: three crewmen of a Soviet Mi-8MT helicopter from the 50th Combined Air Regiment at Barak, alongside two soldiers. Note the parachute on the corporal on the left, and the corrugated metal sheets from which the landing pad is made.
(E. Kuvakin, CC-BY-SA 3.0)

AMBUSH AT THE ABDULLAH-E BURJ BRIDGE

In October 1980, a mechanized Soviet battalion set out in column from Bagram to conduct operations against *mujahideen* in Nejraw to the north-east. To get there, they crossed the bridge at Abdullah-e Burj over the Panjshir River, and two local rebel commanders – Abdul Qader of the *Hezb-e Islami Khalis*, a group which broke away from *Hezb-i Islami*, and Qasab of Massoud's Panjshir Front – decided to mount a joint operation on the assumption that it would return the same way. This it duly did, without mounting any serious reconnaissance along the route, and was caught in a textbook ambush with half its force on each side of the river. It was raked by RPG-7s, recoilless rifles and HMGs, while a few mortars added to the carnage. Some 20–30 vehicles were destroyed or disabled, and panic spread along the column. While artillery strikes were called in, by then the rebels had largely dispersed. Especially in the early years of the war, the Soviets were very reluctant to operate at night, so the *mujahideen* had essentially free rein to pick off some more stragglers, loot some of the dead, and make their withdrawal, losing only two men, before a relief column was dispatched the next morning.

approached it, 900 Afghan and Soviet troops launched dismounted attacks on *mujahideen* positions in heights overlooking the town – many exactly the same ones cleared in *Panjshir II* and promptly reoccupied – from whence they had been launching their bombardments. In a further escalation and innovation, this operation for the first time saw the extensive use of Soviet airpower, with surrounding villages bombed sporadically over several days, during breaks in the weather. Sometimes, this was because rebel forces had been identified mustering there, but at others it seems to have been on general principles, just in case. Even at this early stage in the war, avoiding civilian casualties was not a priority for the 40th Army.

This time – although in the main the *mujahideen* stuck to their usual tactics of avoiding pitched battles, disappearing into the countryside (helping explain why one of the Soviets' terms for them was *dukhi*, 'ghosts') – there were cases of intense skirmishes, often at night, when the rebels had the advantage of knowing their terrain and the tradecraft of mountain hunters (and, often, bandits). By 18 November, the operation had petered out.

Rebel casualties were thus relatively high, with estimates ranging from 50 to 250, and one of their sub-commanders was reportedly killed. To an extent, this could appear to make the operation more successful from Kabul's perspective, but they were dismayed by the *mujahideen*'s new-found willingness to fight and what this would mean for any continued attempt to maintain the outpost in Rukha. The 40th Army's planners presented two options: a major enlargement of the presence in the Panjshir, or a withdrawal. By the end of November, the decision had been made, and on 12 December, under cover of a new wave of airstrikes from Su-17M3 fighter-bombers of the 136th Squadron flown out of Bagram, and even ageing DRA Il-28s, preparations began to be made to pull the garrison from Rukha. By the end of the year, there were no DRA forces remaining in the valley.

A Soviet colonel who had been involved in later Panjshir operations told me afterwards that he felt that was a serious mistake:

> Massoud only got stronger, and the [government] Afghans only got more scared of him. We never would have a better chance to take and hold the Panjshir, and even if that

Civilians were caught between the rebel and government forces, often with terrible implications. Here, rebel fighters return to a village gutted by a Soviet bombardment. (US DOD, Public Domain)

had meant we needed to throw half the [40th Army] into it, we should have done it, it would have been worth it.

The DRA's forces at the time were in a terrible state, overstretched and mutinous, and the 40th Army strength was only at around 50,000, compared with the 108,700 to which it would later grow. Lieutenant-General Boris Tkach, its commander since September, was concentrating on the Logar region, south of Kabul, as well as the struggle to maintain control of Herat and Kandahar. He felt that the Panjshir simply did not seem to merit such an effort – a decision that may have been a serious mistake.

PANJSHIR IV, SEPTEMBER 1981: A SOVIET DEFEAT

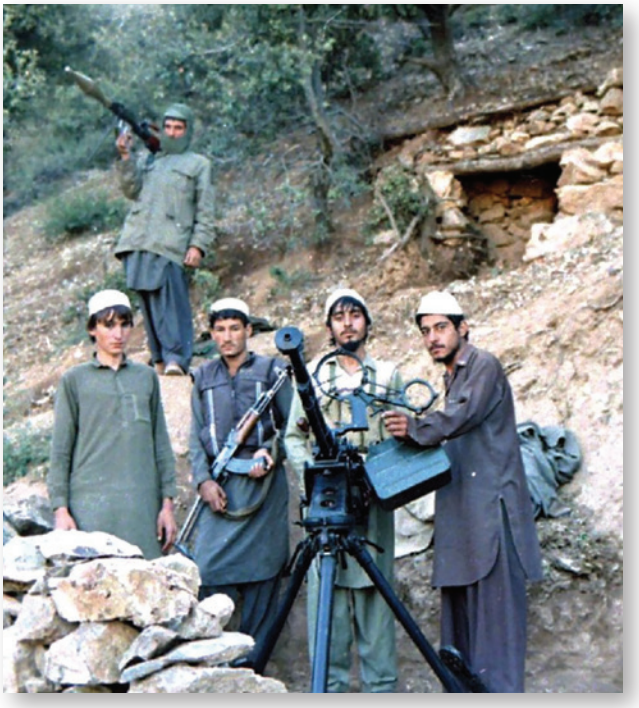
If the Kremlin had anticipated its Afghan adventure to be a brief and largely symbolic operation after the initial coup that was *Storm-333*, by the end of 1980, it had reluctantly come to accept that this was going to be a rather different kind of mission. The *OKSVA* settled in for a long haul. It was also only beginning to mount major combined-arms offensives, with Operation *Blow* (*Udar*) in the Central Provinces the first division-strength deployment. By the end of 1980, the 40th Army had lost 1,484 Soviet soldiers as fatalities and 30,612 injured or laid low by disease. It had also lost 18 tanks, 173 other vehicles and 40 aircraft.

In many ways, then, 1981 was the year of redefinition for both Soviets and rebels alike. The Soviets built up the 40th Army, not simply expanding it but reorienting it for a counter-insurgency mission. The anti-aircraft units which had accompanied the initial invasion had been withdrawn through 1980, for example, but now they were replaced by more infantry and artillery. Meanwhile, the rebels were likewise adapting and expanding their operations. An early attempt to create a common front, the Islamic Alliance of Afghan *Mujahideen*, was essentially stillborn thanks to irreconcilable personal,

A destroyed T-62 tank lies abandoned in the Panjshir Valley. The T-62 was the main Soviet tank during the war, but often fell victim to mines and RPGs. The Soviets admitted to losing 147 T-62s and older T-55s in Afghanistan, although the US military claimed the real toll was more than twice that. (Jim Kelly, CC BY 2.0)

factional and religious differences between groups. However, local tactical cooperation was still possible, and this often allowed attacks in greater numbers and at longer ranges than before. In August, for example, this permitted Massoud to send a force into the government-held town of Golbahar, close to the mouth of the Panjshir, where his men were able to spend a night and a day in essentially unchallenged control, using the opportunity to round up and execute by their count around 70 officials, PDPA members and other government sympathizers.

Given that it followed on from the defection to Massoud's ranks of a company's worth of DRA troops based in Charikar (some accounts say a battalion, but most of the soldiers simply deserted and went home) in July, the Golbahar attack seems to have catalyzed the decision in Kabul that it was time to cut Massoud down to size. However, Lieutenant-General Tkach did not appreciate just how far the Panjshir Front had not only been able to expand its forces in the past nine months, but also to prepare for the by now predictable mechanized assault. In late August, a force of 2,000 Soviet and DRA troops was assembled from the 181st Regiment and the 357th Guards Airborne Regiment, accompanied by Afghans of the 2nd Division – the last time such a relatively small force was sent into the Panjshir – and on 6 September they moved into the valley.

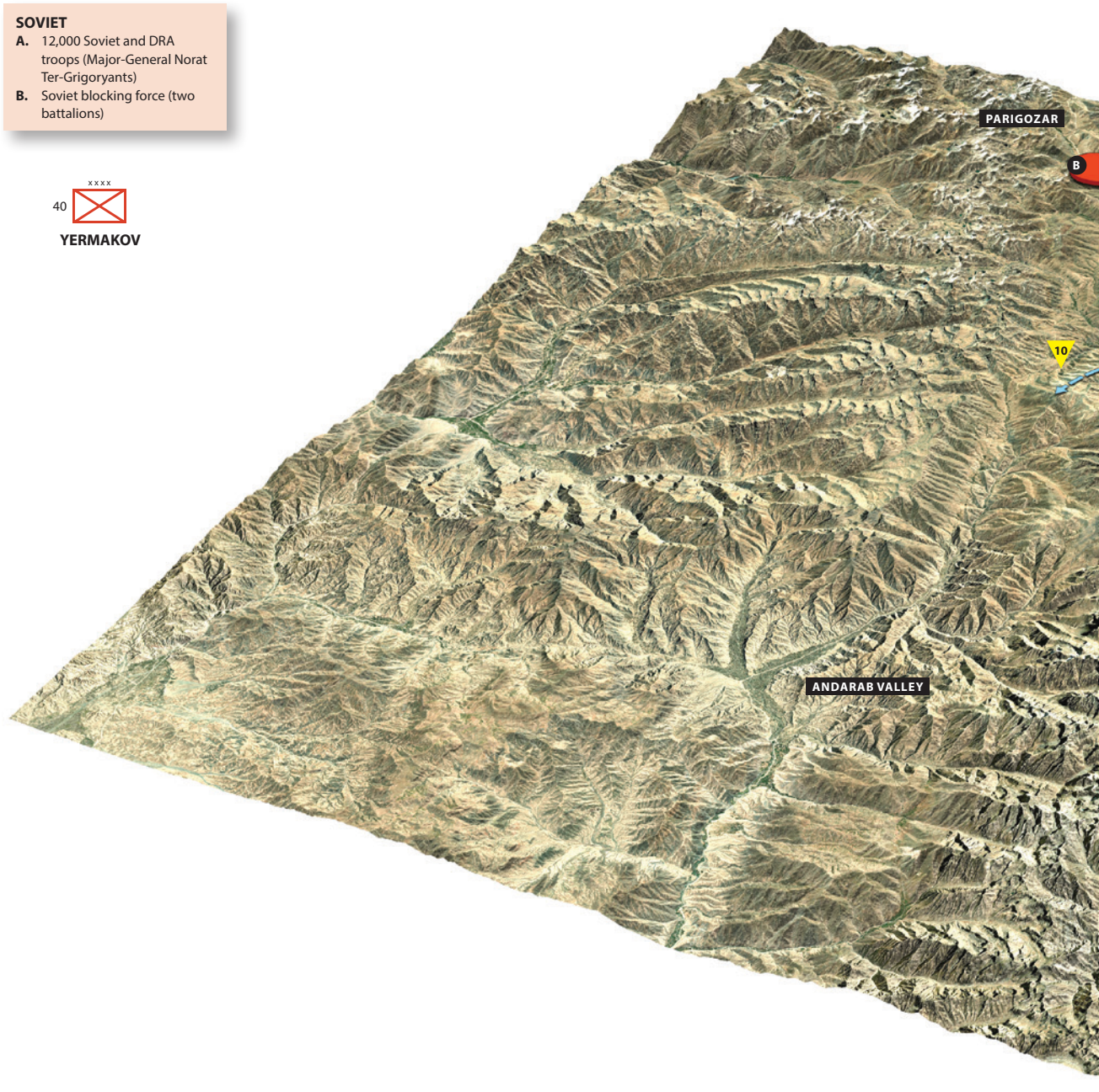


Young *Jamiat-e Islami* fighters man a Soviet-made 12.7mm DShK heavy machine gun. The 'Dashaka' was prized as both a short-range anti-aircraft weapon and also a weapon capable of ripping through the light armour of Soviet personnel carriers, qualities which more than made up for its ungainly weight. (Erwin Franzen, CC-BY-SA 3.0)

This was now laced with lookout posts, fortifications and arms dumps, and guarded by a force that, by the middle of 1981, had grown to around 2,200 fighters (and a large number of sympathizers who, being Afghans, might well be willing and able to produce and use a rifle to defend their homes). Although older weapons were still in widespread use, the majority of the *mujahideen* were now using AK-47 rifles and had the ammunition stocks to be able to use automatic fire without excessive fears of running dry.

They had also heavily mined the access routes into the lower valley. This was known to the Soviets, but they had not realized that Massoud had also predicted their likely response. The *Panjshir IV* offensive was led by mechanized Soviet troops, with DRA forces ready to provide support for mopping-up operations. To minimize the losses of armoured vehicles, they deployed sappers to clear the way. The *mujahideen* were ready for this, and had mortars emplaced already zeroed in on the minefields, as well as concealed gun pits with 12.7mm DShK HMGs. Together, they inflicted serious casualties on the engineers, especially as the DShKs could shred the tyres of their BTR-60 APCs and, at closer ranges, their light armour, too.

The attack continued, albeit slower than intended, as the Soviets had to use artillery and airpower to suppress the rebel positions and smoke to cover their sappers. However, momentum and morale alike had suffered and the operation would be aborted after only five days, having penetrated just 25km into the valley, failing to get beyond Bazarak. A *Sarandoy* force

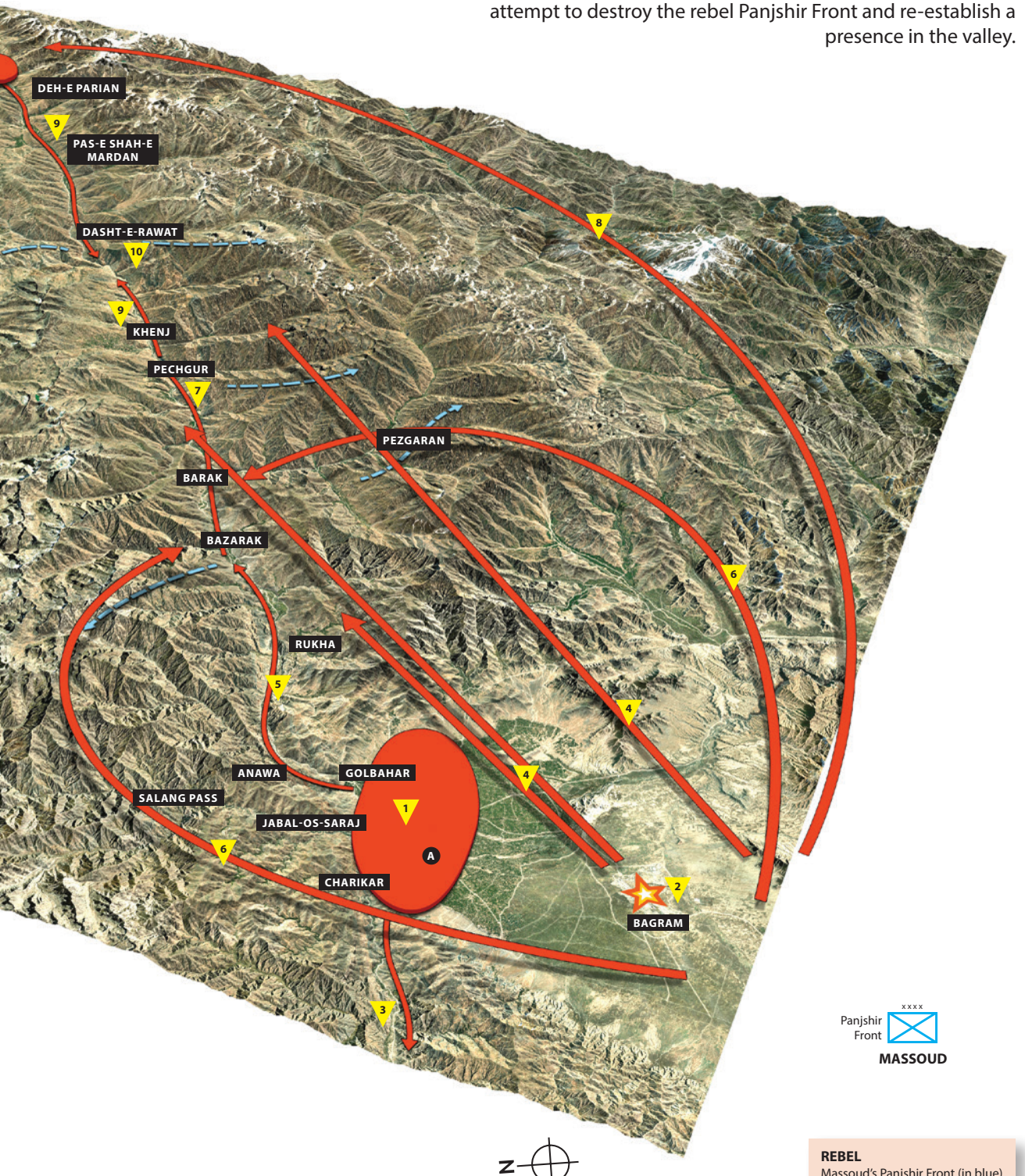


EVENTS

1. Assault force of 12,000 Soviet and DRA troops under Major-General Norat Ter-Grigoryants musters at Jabal-os-Saraj and Golbahar.
2. 25 April: The rebels launch a pre-emptive raid on Bagram Airbase, destroying a number of aircraft.
3. 16 May: DRA troops stage a feint up the Gorband Valley.
4. 17 May: A major bombing campaign is launched, including Su-25s flying out of Bagram.
5. After a heavy artillery preparation barrage, the Soviet assault force advances to Bazarak, meeting growing resistance as it passes Rukha.
6. Soviet strike teams are inserted by helicopter onto heights along the initial route of advance, often facing ambushes by rebels in the mountains.
7. The Soviet ground offensive continues to Khenj.
8. A two-battalion blocking force is deployed to Parigozar at the north-eastern end of the valley by helicopter, to prevent rebel withdrawal.
9. The Soviet blocking force moves down the valley to Dasht-e-Rawat, to connect with the advancing main force.
10. However, the Afghan rebels largely make tactical withdrawals up side valleys to avoid pitched confrontations.

PANJSHIR V, 1982

This operation was conceived by the Afghan government as a demonstration of strength, employing 12,000 Soviet and DRA troops in an extensive and ambitious attempt to destroy the rebel Panjshir Front and re-establish a presence in the valley.



Note: The base map shows an area of 138km x 115km.

REBEL
Massoud's Panjshir Front (in blue)

***PANJSHIR V*: ATTACKERS' ORBAT**

DRA
10th Infantry Brigade (20th Division)
4th Infantry Regiment (8th Division)
7th Infantry Regiment (11th Division)
72nd Infantry Regiment (8th Division)
203rd Reconnaissance Battalion
444th Commando Regiment (37th Commando Brigade)

SOVIET
149th Motor Rifle Regiment (201st Motor Rifle Division)
177th Motor Rifle Regiment (108th Motor Rifle Division)
180th Motor Rifle Regiment (108th Motor Rifle Division)
181st Motor Rifle Regiment (108th Motor Rifle Division)
66th Independent Motor Rifle Brigade
191st Independent Motor Rifle Regiment
860th Independent Motor Rifle Regiment
317th Air Assault Regiment (103rd Guards Airborne Division)
345th Independent Guards Airborne Regiment
781st Independent Reconnaissance Battalion (180th Motor Rifle Division)
783rd Independent Reconnaissance Battalion (201st Motor Rifle Division)
1074th Artillery Regiment (108th Motor Rifle Division)

prepared to take over security duties higher up the valley had embarrassingly to be stood down. The DRA/Soviet forces took around a hundred casualties, and the rebels a third of that. It was the first actual defeat the 40th Army had suffered in the Panjshir – and it was the last time they would take Massoud so lightly.

PANJSHIR V, MAY 1982: TAKING THE VALLEY

On 7 May 1982, Lieutenant-General Viktor Yermakov, a career tank officer with the reputation of being a tough but thoughtful commander, replaced Lieutenant-General Tkach as commander of the 40th Army. He inherited the plans for the largest offensive yet against the Panjshir Front, and although he had some misgivings about the details, he managed it with the attention to detail and personal care for his troops that made him a particular bête noire for the rebels who would eventually put a 1.5 million Afghani ($30,000) price on his head that forced his security detail to take unprecedented measures – enlarging his detail of bodyguards, issuing them body armour and changing the registration plates on his car, sometimes several times a day.

D-30 122mm howitzers in DRA service. A rugged and practical design with a range of over 15km, the D-30 was widely used by both the DRA and Soviets throughout the war. (ITAR-TASS/Viktor Budan via Getty Images)

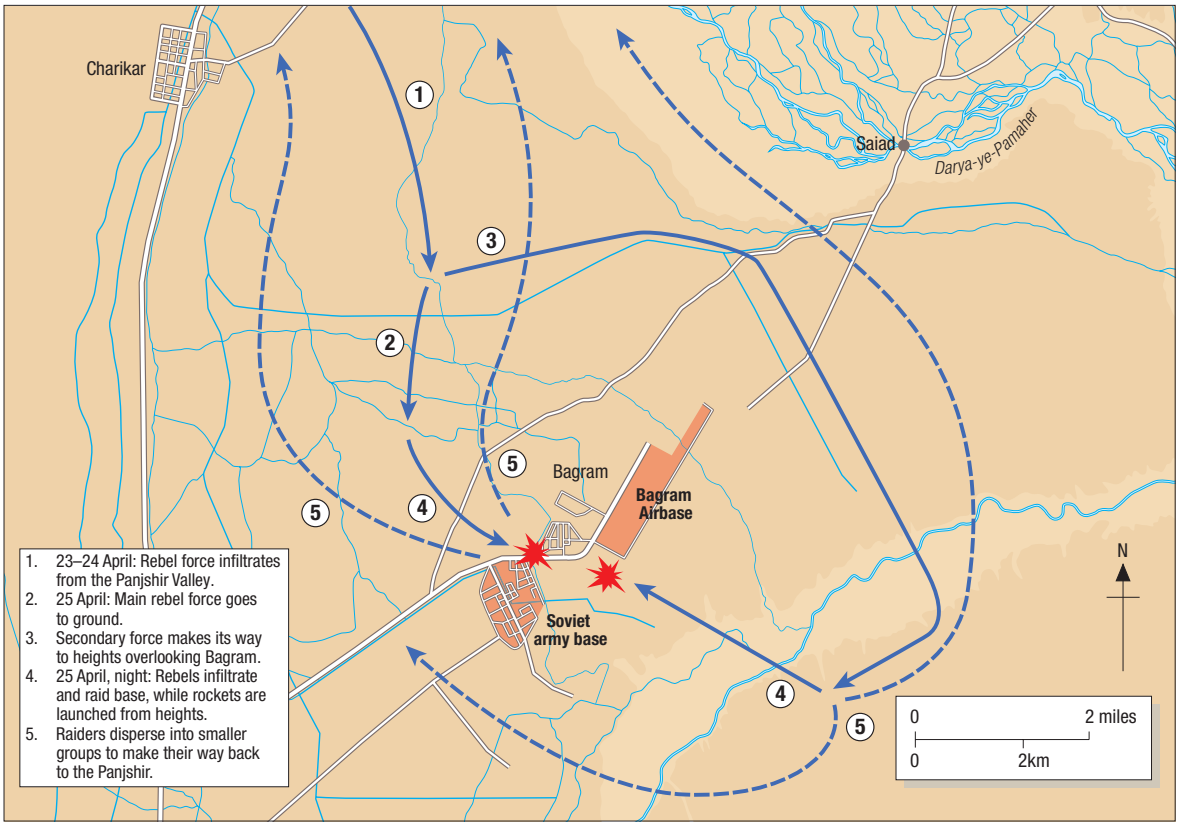
Bagram was the vital city and airbase between the valley and Kabul. Here, Panjshir Front fighters look down on Bagram from the hills above the city, during a stunning sunset. (Patrick ROBERT/Sygma via Getty Images)

The problem with *Panjshir V* was that both the timing and the objective had been driven by political calculations, and over the objections of both Tkach and the General Staff in Moscow, who feared excessive casualties both for their troops and the civilian population. (This was not necessarily a sign of growing humanitarianism so much as a realization of the way heavy-handed tactics simply drove more recruits into the arms of the rebellion.) Nonetheless, Kabul was desperate to regain control of the Panjshir, not just for military reasons but political ones. They needed a demonstration of their strength, given that the March 1982 National Conference of the PDPA had failed to be the hoped-for display of national unity. As British journalist Mark Urban put it in his book *War in Afghanistan*, 'Within the resistance, Ahmad Shah Massoud had attained the status of superstar. He played host to foreign film crews, he trained *mujahideen* from other regions, and his men staged daring raids.' In short, by his very presence, he was a beacon to the wider resistance – including even groups of different ethnicities and political and religious affiliations – and likewise a victory against him could consolidate Kabul's position across the country. In the circumstances, the Communist Party leadership in Moscow felt they had to accede.

Major-General Norat Ter-Grigoryants, 40th Army chief of staff, was put in charge of an operation that would see fully 12,000 Soviet and DRA troops unleashed in an ambitious effort to destroy the Panjshir Front's force in the field and its command structure and logistical infrastructure, block crucial supply routes and ultimately not only re-establish a presence at Rukha but also establish one at Anawa, which would – the hope was – help pen the Lion of Panjshir.

He assembled a large force of DRA and Soviet troops, including Afghan commandos who had emerged as one of the few reliably effective elements of Kabul's military. By the end of the offensive, some 12,000 troops, 320 tanks and other armoured vehicles, 155 artillery pieces, 104 helicopters and 26 fixed-wing aircraft had been involved, making it the most extensive operation yet.

Rebel raid on Bagram, 23–25 April 1982


Charikar
Saiad
Darya-ye-Pamaher
Bagram
Bagram Airbase
Soviet army base
1. 23–24 April: Rebel force infiltrates from the Panjshir Valley.
2. 25 April: Main rebel force goes to ground.
3. Secondary force makes its way to heights overlooking Bagram.
4. 25 April, night: Rebels infiltrate and raid base, while rockets are launched from heights.
5. Raiders disperse into smaller groups to make their way back to the Panjshir.
N
0 2 miles
0 2km

Against them were an estimated 4,000 *mujahideen*, and a civilian population of perhaps 40,000, reduced by war and massive out-migration from the valley's 1979 figure of 100,000. The continuing professionalization of the Panjshir Front had seen Massoud's forces divided into *motoraks*, mobile combat groups, and *zabets*, or local self-defence forces, with perhaps a half dozen of the former, and 25 or so of the latter. The rebels had also continued to expand their arsenals. Increasingly, they were equipped not just with RPG-7 anti-tank rocket launchers but also Chinese Type 56 75mm recoilless rifles and mortars.

The plan was for the operation to begin in the early hours of 16 May 1982 and to last 13–15 days. The Panjshir was divided into three areas of operation, with a separate joint DRA–Soviet task force assigned to each. The main thrust was by a mixed, mechanized force comprising the Soviet 177th, 180th, 181st and 191st regiments, with fire support from the 122mm guns of the 1074th Regiment, and three DRA regiments – the 4th, 71st and 72nd – which were part truck-mounted, part mechanized.

While a feint was launched along the Gorband River valley to the north of the Panjshir, this force thrust up the Panjshir Valley, methodically taking each settlement on the way. Meanwhile, two other task forces would be airlifted to heights commanding the valley. Around a thousand troops from the 66th Brigade and the 201st Division, as well as the DRA's 20th Regiment and 203rd Reconnaissance Battalion, would be deployed by helicopter to several

locations 20–40km up the valley. A smaller force from the Soviets' 103rd Guards Airborne Division and the DRA's 444th Commando Regiment would take heights further along the Panjshir, out to 75km, with reconnaissance teams taking up positions to a depth of 100km.

In the name of security, the planning of the operation had been carried out solely by Soviet officers in the 40th Army staff, with orders going out to Soviet unit commanders only five days before the attack was due to start, and in sealed envelopes. Their DRA counterparts found out only later, sometimes literally with no notice. These precautions may have helped operational security, but did not help cooperation, nor DRA morale. Nonetheless, Massoud had had a sense that an offensive was on the way, perhaps because his agents in Kabul noted unusual levels of activity around the 40th Army headquarters. He had made a daring play to forestall it, by sending several *motoraks* to launch a raid on Bagram Airbase. On the night of 25 April, they infiltrated its outer perimeter and launched rockets and mortar rounds at the aircraft parked inside. Although their claims of destroying 23 aircraft are a typical exaggeration, they certainly did destroy a number, damaged many more, and also demonstrated that even this heavily defended facility was vulnerable. Over time, the Soviets would push the defensive perimeter further out, and expand their security measures with motion detectors, dogs and tripwire flares and mines.

The distinctive silhouette of an Su-25 close-attack aircraft, as it fires its internally mounted Gryazev-Shipunov GSh-23 autocannon. The Su-25 acquired a formidable reputation in Afghanistan, and from 1981 became an unwelcome but frequent guest in the skies over the Panjshir. (Sergei Bobylev/TASS via Getty Images)

In any case, this changed nothing. On the night of 16 May, DRA troops of the 4th Regiment entered Golbahar to seal the neck of the valley, while the Soviets prepared for the main land assault, which began on the morning of the 17th. Meanwhile, helicopters from Bagram were busy lifting the two smaller task forces to their objectives on the heights commanding the valley, with the first being deployed on 17–19 May, the second on 18 May. Reconnaissance teams on foot continued up the watershed line, penetrating as far as 100km up the valley.

At 0400hrs on 17 May, the Soviets launched a massive and concentrated bombardment, starting with a major aviation strike across the whole length of the valley. Along with Su-17 fighter-bombers and MiG-21 fighters, the Soviets deployed a handful of Su-24 bombers and, for the first time in a sustained deployment, Su-25 Grach (Rook) 'Frogfoot' close air support aircraft from the 200th Independent Attack Squadron. To a large extent, the targets were predictable, and the Afghan population and rebels alike sheltered under cover, in caves and hides. The damage to villages was considerable, but the casualties were limited.

The Mi-8 helicopter was a mainstay of Soviet air assault forces and, as certain DRA forces became more reliable and effective, they too adopted the tactic of using them to block off rebel escape routes and land patrols. Here, Afghan troops land in the Andarab Valley, north of the Panjshir, during operations in 1986. (ITAR-TASS/Viktor Budan via Getty Images)

This was followed by a more discriminating artillery preparation barrage, 122mm howitzers and 220mm rockets from BM-27 Uragan MLRSs targeting identified and suspected *mujahideen* strongpoints. Meanwhile, the main ground advance began. The Soviet forces leading the main attack reached Rukha relatively easily, with no more than minor harassing attacks, their advance being led by a platoon-strength GPZ Forward Security Element of T-62 tanks fitted with mine- and obstacle-clearing blades. As they approached Bazarak, though, heavy anti-armour mines and RPG-7s disabled three of them, and the real resistance began.

Mujahideen fighters, especially the *motoraks*, would seek to converge on units that had not had the chance to deploy from march order or dig in. When a battalion of the 317th Air Assault Regiment landed to the east of Rukha, it was quickly engaged before it had a chance to consolidate its position. It was only saved by the arrival of the elite 3rd Battalion of the 180th Regiment under Major Ruslan Aushev, one of the most highly decorated veterans of the *OKSVA*. Having dispersed the *mujahideen* attackers, Aushev assumed command of the combined force and led the assault on the rebel defences around Rukha, seizing the town.

The rebels also made full use of natural chokepoints, many of which they had already assessed and prepared for ambushes. At Doab, some 12km beyond Bazarak, the main road crossed a bridge over the Panjshir. Here the rebels had

The side valleys of the Panjshir were places of refuge for the rebels, often impassable to vehicles and difficult to negotiate even on foot, as this picture of a valley close to Anawa shows. (Jacques Langevin/Sygma via Getty Images)

buried a large mine jury-rigged from an unexploded FAB-500 bomb, detonated by a command wire. When a mechanized company in BTR-60PB APCs and T-62 tanks approached the bridge, the bomb was detonated, the 500kg of high-explosive blowing part of the bridge away and dropping the lead tank into the river. A hail of RPG-7 rounds and machine-gun fire raked the rest of the column, and before the *mujahideen* had been forced to withdraw, two tanks and five APCs had been destroyed, more were damaged, and the advance was halted for hours before an MTU-55 bridge-layer tank could be brought up.

Likewise, many of the troops airlifted onto the heights lacked adequate training in such missions or were unused to operating together. The result was often a period of some confusion in which even the Soviet soldiers' usual instinct – if in doubt, dig in – was not being indulged. For example, in the heights overlooking Khenj, halfway up the valley, a company of the 345th Independent Guards Airborne Regiment soon came under fire from *mujahideen* on a neighbouring height, using HMGs and .303 rifles with a far greater effective range than the Soviets' 5.45mm AK-74s. They had to call in air support from Mi-24 helicopter gunships to suppress the rebel positions with S-5 and S-8 rockets, to allow the paratroopers time to find cover and deploy their own snipers and machine guns.

However, in what was in part a cunning and highly secret plan and in part a response to the unexpectedly tough rebel resistance, at this point Ter-Grigoryants revealed the last element in his strategy. If the main assault was the 'hammer', then the 'anvil' against which he hoped to smash Massoud's forces was another force that was only deployed on 22 May, a mix of Soviet and DRA troops. The 1st Battalion of the 860th Independent Motor Rifle Regiment was airlifted to Bagram without its armoured vehicles and, together with the DRA's 20th Regiment, formed a 600-strong element that was lifted by helicopters to seal off the eastern exit from the valley, near Evim and Shahrai close to the Anjoman Pass that leads into Badakhshan. Here a DRA garrison had been hanging on at Dasht-e-Rawat, and the arrival of fresh troops on the heels of a major aviation strike was a genuine surprise for Massoud.

This not only blocked resupply routes from Pakistan, it also prevented any withdrawal directly up the valley. It also temporarily demoralized and confused the *mujahideen* – according to some accounts, Massoud, under the urging of his supporters, actually withdrew from the Panjshir and began to manage the defence from a safe distance. As one of them later put it, 'If we lost the Panjshir but kept Massoud, we could rebuild; if we kept the valley but lost Massoud, we were lost.'

The operation lasted two weeks, and by the end, the attacking forces had fought their way the entire length of the valley, starting each day with a half hour's artillery barrage and combining air assaults, air support and direct ground attacks in a repetitive pattern that allowed a steady advance of 8–10km per day, but rarely allowed the attackers to trap their enemies and inflict serious casualties. Ter-Grigoryants had shown that the 'Lion of Panjshir' could be pushed from his lair, arms depots and defensive positions had been located and destroyed, valuable intelligence had been gathered – including, reportedly, a list of Massoud's agents in Kabul that led to a two-day and two-night series of arrests by the *KhAD* – and perhaps 600–800 rebels were dead or incapacitated.

Furthermore, the 40th Army had demonstrated new capabilities, such as the use of mass helicopter landings – in total some 4,200 soldiers were lifted –

The burnt-out wrecks of two BMP-2 IFVs in the flat plain of the Panjshir, against the stark, rocky valley sides. The geography of the combat environment, which channelled their mechanized forces into routes with very little cover, was one of the perennial problems for the Soviets. (Jim Kelly, CC BY 2.0)

and being able to spring a surprise on even the wily Massoud. He had not anticipated that the Soviets would either block the northern end of the valley or deploy as many troops in the uplands. Anticipating that the offensive would follow the same pattern as the last ones, his defences had largely been concentrated at the southern end, and he had not held back reserves to respond to vertical envelopment.

The Soviets had also learned the importance of controlling the valley through a direct presence of their own, seasoned troops, not recalcitrant Afghan conscripts, and aggressive patrols out of their defensive cantonments. Rukha would be reoccupied, by close to a thousand soldiers: a mechanized battalion and tank platoon from the Soviet 177th Motor Rifle Regiment for garrison duties, supported by a battery each of 122mm D-30 2A13 howitzers and BM-21 MLRS from the 1074th Artillery Regiment as well as an electronic-warfare platoon from the 254th Special Purpose Communications Regiment and DRA *Sarandoy* security troops. However, in a key difference from the earlier, essentially defensive notion of the force, the 177th *Spetsnaz* Detachment was also attached to the garrison, to conduct aggressive patrols across the valley.

There were also new bases at Bazarak and Anawa, with forces intended to do more than just shelter in place. The Bazarak garrison was made up of experienced paratroopers of the 345th Independent Guards Airborne Regiment with a battery of D-30 guns. They also manned a network of 20 *zastavas*, small platoon- and company-strength observation posts, around the district. Given that it was closer to the southern mouth of the valley and quick reinforcement and air support from Bagram, the Anawa force was less of a garrison, more a patrol base, comprising some 400 elite troops from the Soviet 2nd Parachute Airborne Battalion and the DRA's 444th Commando Regiment, with another battery of D-30s.

There is no escaping that the Soviets achieved their objectives and handed Kabul the demonstrative victory it had wanted. Yet a few months later, a new offensive would be launched, and in January 1983, a truce with Massoud arranged. The truth of the matter was that, as ever, the two sides were fighting different wars. The Soviet and DRA forces had taken heavy losses as a result of their determination to battle through, regardless: an estimated 1,000 Soviet deaths and perhaps half as many Afghan soldiers, reflecting both the proportions deployed and the way the former led the way in most attacks. There were at least another 2,000 seriously wounded.

This certainly was a political blow to Massoud, and a serious disruption to his organization. However, rebel losses were relatively limited, as they had still often been able to go to ground or exfiltrate the Panjshir through ravines and side valleys. The three new bases at Rukha, Bazarak and Anawa may have given Kabul a new presence there, but they also represented new

targets, which would be under constant threat of harassing attacks. Many of the *zastavas* had to be resupplied by helicopter, a difficult, expensive and dangerous commitment. While the forces there could indeed exert a degree of control over the valley floor, they were unable to contest control of the commanding heights, which returned to *mujahideen* hands. Hence, within a couple of months, Yermakov would be turning his gaze back to the Panjshir.

PANJSHIR VI, AUGUST–SEPTEMBER 1982: THE ATTEMPTED MOP-UP

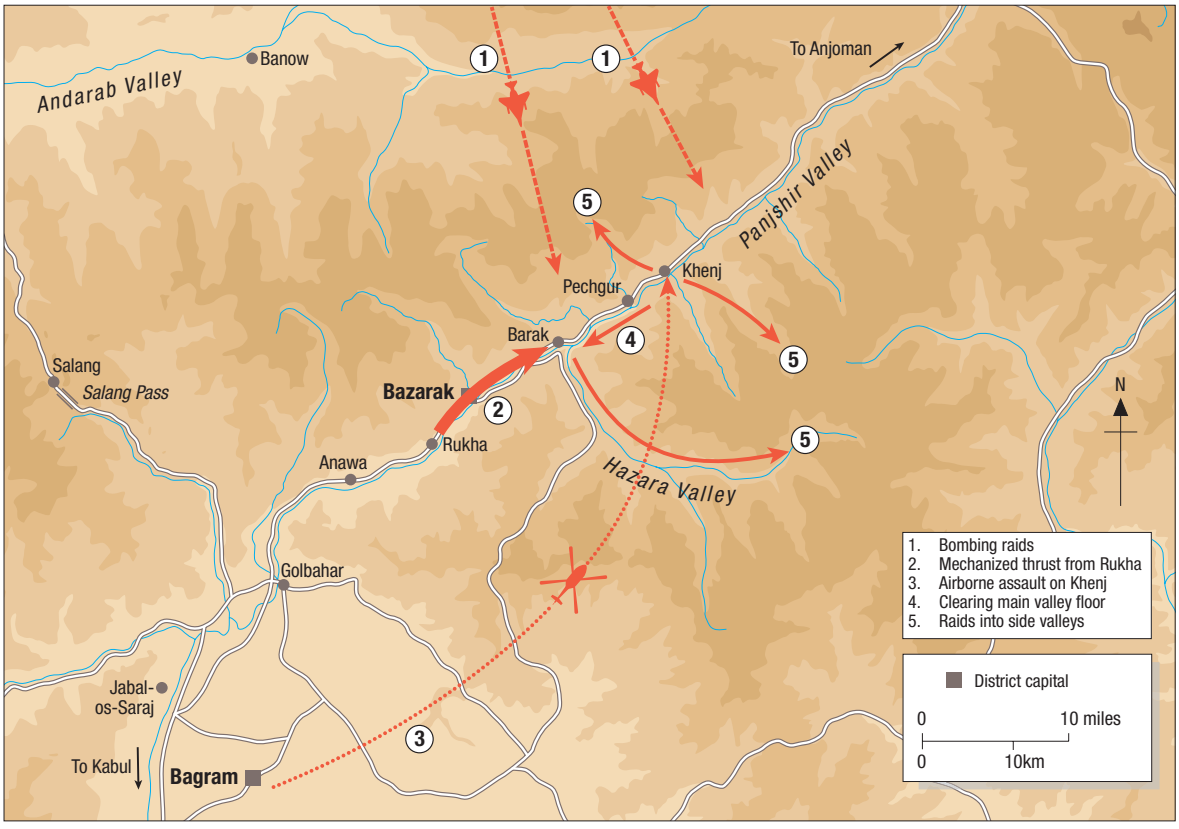
There was a clear understanding in both the 40th Army headquarters and the Kabul government that while *Panjshir V* had left them in a stronger position in the valley than they had experienced for years, it was only partial and fragile. After all, Massoud was still at large and reorganizing his dispersed but not seriously degraded organization. In particular, the *mujahideen* had reoccupied the heights overlooking the valley as soon as the assault forces had withdrawn, from which they would launch sporadic but symbolically effective rocket attacks on the garrisons below. They also continued to dominate the side valleys, from which they would launch raids into the Panjshir, especially targeting the convoys supplying the garrisons.

The sixth offensive, for all its scale, was thus seen as more of a follow-on operation, mopping up remaining rebels. This was to prove a serious planning flaw. *Panjshir V* had, after all, had a clear series of defined mission objectives: taking the towns along the valley floor. *Panjshir VI*'s objectives were about driving *mujahideen* from specified areas and killing or capturing more of them. The first provided no more than temporary relief, and the second largely relied on the rebels themselves being willing to play the attackers' game. Without any way of compelling Massoud's forces to stand and fight on terms that so obviously suited the 40th Army, in practice the result was much sound and fury – and considerable collateral damage to the civilian population – but little lasting impact. Given the political realities of the situation, Massoud in effect would win any draw: every time the 'Lion of Panjshir' weathered another offensive, his legend only grew.

Before autumn limited the scope for campaigning, and especially the utility of Soviet airpower, the decision was taken to mount a follow-on operation to try to consolidate Kabul's grip on the Panjshir and hinder Massoud's efforts to recover his military strength. Another force of over 12,000 soldiers was assembled, again under Lieutenant-General Ter-Grigoryants, a mix of Soviet assault troops, drawing especially on the *VDV* paratroopers and the *Spetsnaz* special forces, backed by DRA infantry for rear-area security missions and also to establish more garrisons, strongpoints and observation posts across the valley.

As usual, the offensive was opened on 25 August with several days of bombing of villages thought to be harbouring *mujahideen*, this time also including sorties by Tu-16 'Badger' heavy bombers operating out of Termez inside the USSR. A high-altitude strategic bomber able to carry 9,000kg (20,000lb) in bombs, the Tu-16 was a devastating weapon, but a lack of proper forward air control meant that it could only be used for pre-planned missions against villages and similar fixed locations, and so the lower-flying and more nimble Su-25s, which carried both bombs and missiles, were

Panjshir VI, August–September 1982



arguably more effective, especially as they began to be unleashed on 'hunter missions', free to engage targets of opportunity.

On 30 August, the main operation began, with a mechanized advance up the valley from Rukha, led by the usual suspects of the 108th Motor Rifle Division, and a major heliborne landing at Khenj of the 345th Independent Guards Airborne Regiment and the DRA's 203rd Reconnaissance Battalion. This time, the Soviets were more prepared for ambushes, sending out reconnaissance patrols ahead of their main movements and also using Mi-24 gunships as aerial spotters, but in any case the *mujahideen* largely withdrew and conserved their forces; most casualties were suffered by civilians, many of whom fled their homes. By the end of 1 September, the two task forces had connected, and the valley floor was essentially in their hands.

At this point, the Soviets began launching search-and-destroy missions into the side valleys of the Panjshir, especially along the Hazara, Chawa and Parende tributaries. The aim was not to take ground so much as catch and kill rebel forces, often by provoking ambushes that could then be used to locate the *mujahideen* and call down fire from gunships or artillery back in the valley. Typically, a blocking force of dismounted *Spetsnaz* or paratroopers would be dropped by helicopter 5–15km down the side valley, and then mechanized forces, often paratroopers in BMDs, would push up the gorge and try to trap the rebels between them. After some notable successes for this unexpected new tactic, Massoud ordered his men

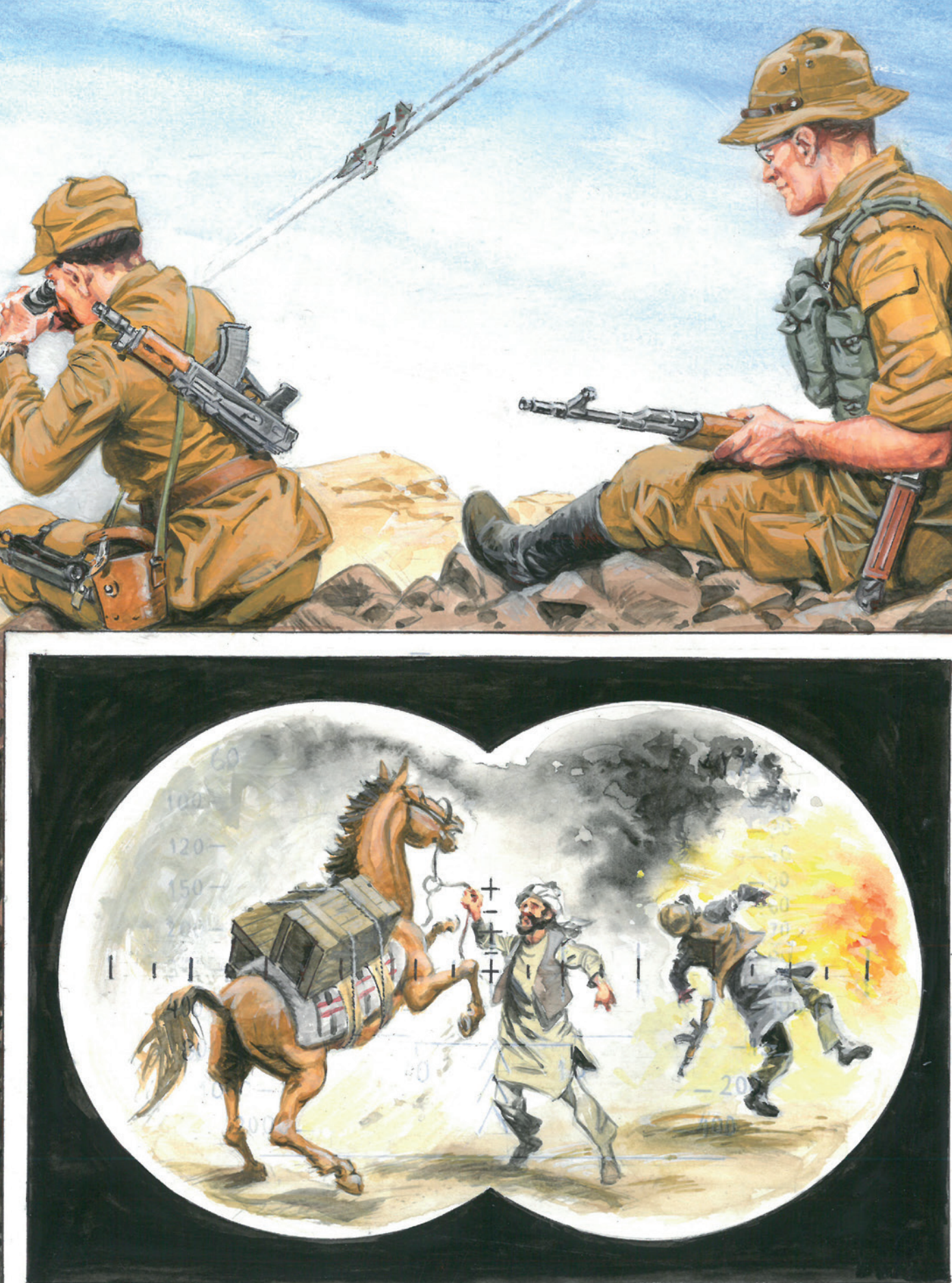
Tu-16 bombers flying out of airbases inside the USSR flew high-level bombing missions over the Panjshir. They were immune to any weapons the rebels fielded, but by the same token were often relatively inaccurate and indiscriminate in their attacks. (USAF, Public Domain)

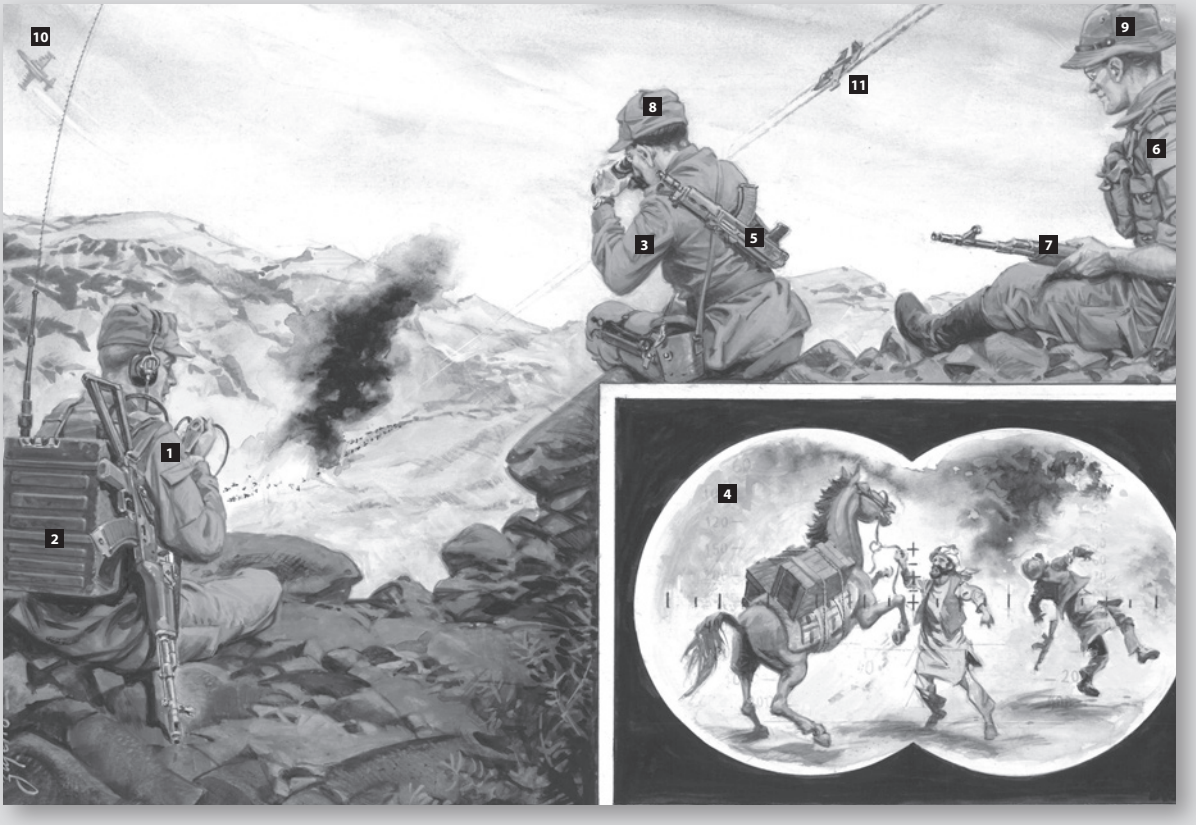
to withdraw even further up the side valleys or to go to ground in the heights above them, even if it meant passing up opportunities to ambush the Soviets.

On 10 September, the offensive was wound down. Lieutenant-General Yermakov declared it a victory and control of the valley was handed over to Kabul. The Soviets withdrew to their bases at Rukha, Bazarak and Anawa or from the Panjshir altogether – there was never a shortage of fronts needing battle-hardened *Spetsnaz* and *VDV*, after all. They had suffered perhaps another 400 or more casualties in the process, but felt their job had been done.

Again, though, such territorial victories are often illusory in a guerrilla war. Responsibility for maintaining control over the Panjshir was largely handed over to the DRA's forces. Rukha continued to be a base for aggressive Soviet patrols and raids, especially under Lieutenant-Colonel Boris Kerimbayev, commander of the 177th *Spetsnaz* Detachment. Unwilling simply to hunker down in his cantonment, he led a series of small-scale operations, including strikes into the highlands to drive back *mujahideen* efforts to regain territories commanding the town. Amongst the *mujahideen*, Kerimbayev became known as *Kara Maior* (the Black Major). Nonetheless, there was a steady price to be paid for this tempo of operations, and before the 177th *OSN* was withdrawn to Gulbahor in 1983, it had suffered 45 dead and two missing.

However, the DRA forces adopted a much less active posture. Police posts and army strongpoints were established, many with only platoon- or company-strength garrisons, and these proved susceptible to corruption and desertion and vulnerable to rebel attack. Some simply went over the rebels or went AWOL as a group. Others would fall to surprise attacks. The company-strength mechanized infantry garrison at Saricha, towards the northern end of the valley, presumably felt itself safe behind a minefield and with eight tanks laagered around it, but a lack of proper precautions meant that *mujahideen* were able to bypass the minefield. The soldiers surrendered almost as soon as they realized rebels were inside their perimeter, despite the fact that they outnumbered the *mujahideen*, who ended up taking almost 80 prisoners and eight T-55 tanks (although most were simply destroyed in place). Meanwhile, attempts by the *Sarandoy* security police to mount patrols away from the main towns, while often conducted with bravery and decisiveness, increasingly resulted in ambushes. As the DRA Army proved unwilling or unable to provide support, the Ministry of the Interior – to which the *Sarandoy* reported – began petitioning the Soviets to help.





SOVIET ATTACK ON REBEL SUPPLY LINES, JULY 1984 (PP. 60–61)

Over time, Soviet troops – and especially the *Spetsnaz* special forces – would adapt to this country and this war. They were able to take the fight to the *mujahideen* in their own territory and ensure that the devastating firepower at the 40th Army's disposal would – for a chance – actually be delivered with precision onto military targets. A particular priority was the caravan hunt, interdicting the supply lines that brought weapons, ammunition and other supplies into rebel-held areas. In this example, from July 1984, a team of *Spetsnaz* from the 154th Detachment was lifted by Mi-8T helicopters – the version optimized for 'hot and high' mountain-top operations – to a landing zone south-west of the Anjoman Pass. Over three days, they hiked, often travelling by night, to a peak they could use to watch a route *KhAD* agents in Pakistan believed a caravan would take. After three more days' patient observation, spending the days in hides, they saw their prey.

A soldier (**1**) is using an R-159 radio (**2**) to call in targeting information, while an officer (**3**) uses Geodezy B-12 binoculars (the view through which is shown at **4**) to monitor the caravan. *Spetsnaz* officers did not wear insignia of rank on missions, although his lightweight AKS-74U assault carbine (**5**) is a tell. Another soldier (**6**), with no targets in range for his AK-74 (**7**), is simply watching the show. They are all wearing the sand-coloured field uniform which replaced the uncomfortable and dated old Soviet uniforms during the war, and which was thus known as the *afganka*, two with the usual forage cap (**8**), one a 'Panama' hat (**9**). Their backpacks and other kit appropriate for a long-range patrol would be stored in their hides. The caravan is being pummelled by two Su-25 close attack aircraft from Bagram Airbase. One is pulling up (**10**), having just dropped two FAB-500 general purpose bombs, while his wingman (**11**) is delivering a salvo of 80mm S-8 rockets from his B-8M1 rocket pods.

TRUCE, JANUARY–AUGUST 1983

Exasperated by the DRA forces' lack of ability to control the valley – as one former *VDV* officer put it, 'after we had handed it to them as a gift' – the 40th Army staff began considering its options. Winter was a bad time for campaigning, though, and in any case the political realities in Moscow had changed. Leonid Brezhnev had finally died, and in November 1982, former *KGB* chief Yuri Andropov succeeded him as General Secretary. From the first, Andropov had had his doubts about the wisdom of intervening in Afghanistan, and from his point of view there was little virtue throwing more resources into a war that scarcely seemed worth trying to win. He began exploring possibilities for a negotiated Soviet withdrawal, and although his own failing health (in February 1983, he would suffer kidney failure and died a year later) and the complexities of the situation prevented any real progress, for the moment he was keen to avoid escalation.

As a result, the Soviets began negotiating directly with Massoud. The original initiative had come from Lieutenant-Colonel Anatoly Tkachyov, an able and imaginative *GRU* military intelligence officer who had been seeking assets and routes into the Panjshir. Back in 1982, the government had sent groups of PDPA youth activists to Panjshir in a largely futile attempt to win over the local population. Amongst them was one Mirdod Panjshery, an economist, who was especially concerned with the way that the war was breaking families apart. He had reason to be exercised by this specific issue, as he was actually a cousin of Massoud's and had known him since childhood. Tkachyov met Panjshery by chance, and they struck up a friendship, speaking in their common language, English. When he learned of this blood connection, Tkachyov encouraged him to try to open channels to his cousin. It may have been that Tkachyov, an experienced intelligence professional, also had more nefarious potential purposes in mind (certainly the *KhAD* – and reportedly the *KGB* – had several times sought to have

In the latter stages of the war – when they had started to admit that there really was a war in Afghanistan – the Soviets were eager to tout their war heroes. The helicopter, and especially the distinctive Mi-24, became in many ways a symbol of the conflict, and Colonel Sergei Filipchenkov was one of the men behind the rotor. He commanded a gunship of the *OKSVA*'s 50th Separate Mixed Aviation Regiment between 1984 and 1985, during which time he flew 400 sorties, including in *Panjshir VII*, and was later made a Hero of the Soviet Union. (Mark Galeotti)

Massoud assassinated), but he seems from the first to have campaigned to convince his sceptical superiors that there might be scope for some kind of negotiations with the Lion of Panjshir.

The military hierarchy of the 40th Army was not very interested, but Tkachyov managed to get to meet General Pyotr Ivashutin, the head of the *GRU*, during one of his visits to Kabul. Ivashutin was a ruthless and formidable figure, a hawk through and through, but also had the career intelligence officer's nose for a potential opportunity. He approved Tkachyov's plan, and so he began to make overtures to Massoud, through Panjshery. This put him in a good position when Andropov's new line made such truces welcome.

Tkachyov wrote a letter to Massoud, asking for a meeting to discuss a possible truce. Massoud, not unreasonably, suspected a trap. It was well known, after all, that there were bombers on constant standby at Bagram, ready to strike any location at which Massoud was thought to be. He summoned his childhood friend Panjshery to meet him, and after three days he returned with a letter agreeing to a meeting, and guaranteeing Tkachyov's security.

Although some more belligerent voices urged giving Tkachyov some kind of locator to call down an airstrike on Massoud, or else for him to go armed with a hidden bomb, Ivashutin firmly silenced them, and Tkachyov set out with his Farsi interpreter, Maksud Maksudov, on New Year's Eve. In the Soviet military, it was tradition for the New Year to be greeted with a barrage, including signal flares, and lest this look like an attack, Tkachyov had to negotiate with the commander of the Rukha garrison, from the 345th Independent Guards Airborne Regiment, for the excitement to be postponed this time. Tkachyov and Maksudov left Rukha, unarmed and unescorted, and were met by a group of rebels under Ahmad Shah Tajuddin, another relative of Massoud's and his head of security.

They travelled for half the night to a *mujahideen* safe house near Bazarak, where Tkachyov met Massoud the next morning. Interviewed many years later, he remembered Massoud's courtesy and friendly manner, and the

The *kishlaks* or villages of the Panjshir were often virtual mini-forts, behind walls that once protected their inhabitants from bandits and which became bastions for the rebels. (Georges MERILLON/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)

Mujahideen preparing for the attack on Jalalabad, south-east of the Panjshir, after the Soviet withdrawal from that city. (David Stewart-Smith/ Getty Images)

fact that he seemed genuinely to have no personal animosity towards the Soviets, just the PDPA regime. After the usual courtesies of elaborate Afghan hospitality, Massoud invited Tkachyov to the garden, making it clear that it was time to start serious negotiations. At that point, the grey-haired intelligence officer saw that part of the house had been destroyed by a shell or bomb. 'This is fraternal international assistance,' Massoud wryly noted, 'of Soviet troops to the friendly Afghan people.'

He continued: 'If you came to persuade us to give up, don't waste your time. Every day, Kabul's emissaries bombard me with such proposals. They either offer me honourable posts or threaten to grind me into the dust. But, as you can see, I'm still here and I feel fine. We were born in this gorge and we won't leave anywhere. I will fight until you leave.'

Tkachyov simply replied: 'I want to offer you peace. At least for a while.' Massoud was silent for a minute and said, 'Let's go back to the house.' The outcome was an agreement to a truce whereby the Soviets would withdraw their forces from the valley, with the exception of a small garrison at Anawa, close to the valley mouth in return for a mutual ceasefire. Although no formal agreement was made about operations outside the Panjshir, and especially in the Salang Valley, in practice raids there diminished sharply. Civilians were able to return to their homes, and houses, bridges and farmhouses destroyed by the fighting began to be repaired.

For the next six months, Massoud observed his side of the deal. Of course, it was very much in his interests. He was able to reap the local political rewards of having brought peace to the valley and fought the *Shuravi* – the Russians – to a standstill. This led to a number of smaller *mujahideen* groups joining his Panjshir Front, including from the Tajik-dominated Khost wa Fereng district and Takhar Province to the north. It also allowed him to regain the initiative against Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's *Hezb-i Islami*, which had been extending its control into the Andarab district north of the Panjshir and, most crucially, territories to the north-east along the Pakistan border. Hekmatyar had been trying to strangle the flow of weapons and supplies heading towards his rivals – including Massoud – and one of his

sub-commanders, Niazi, had been especially active raiding Massoud's caravans in and around the upper Panjshir. By breaking his grip on these supply routes, the Panjshiris were able to rebuild their arsenals.

After all, Massoud did not expect the truce to last forever (nor had Tkachyov promised it), and put his usual energy into preparing for the next onslaught. He rebuilt the defences of the Panjshir with lessons learned from the recent offensives, not least extending the network of forts, lookout posts and arms caches into the side valleys, providing more scope for defence in depth.

This was a wise precaution. Kabul was furious about the truce, and Babrak Karmal pressed the Soviets – both the 40th Army and the political leadership in Moscow – instead to launch a new offensive into the Panjshir. Although the DRA's forces were in no way willing or able to take on Massoud without the Soviets, what followed were a series of truce-breaking provocations, sometimes carried out by Afghans, sometimes by Soviet commanders unhappy with the new line. Several times, Soviet aircraft conducted airstrikes in the Panjshir, with the 40th Army explaining them away as 'unfortunate mistakes'.

When Tkachyov's tour of duty in Afghanistan came to an end in April 1983, Massoud invited him to stay. When the intelligence officer replied that he had a wife and children back home, Massoud said: 'Stay, choose any house, and we will repair it for you … According to our custom, we will give you four wives, and you can choose any beauties.' He declined, but they parted warmly, and Tkachyov would be awarded the Order of the Red Star for his work. Poor Panjshery, without the protection of a Soviet uniform, was rather less fortunate. The Kabul government had him arrested, accused of betraying the people's revolution, and he was tortured before being thrown into the notorious Pul-e-Charki Prison, where he would spend seven long years before being freed after the PDPA's fall.

PANJSHIR VII, APRIL–SEPTEMBER 1984: BACK TO THE WAR

For more than six months, the ceasefire – mainly – held, but by August 1983, the strains were already showing. DRA and occasionally Soviet attacks in the valley were continuing, and became more blatant. At the same time, Massoud's forces were openly conducting raids from their haven in the Panjshir, attacking convoys on the Hairatan–Kabul highway, ambushing government forces in the

PANJSHIR-DRIVEN REORGANIZATION

The Soviets regularly considered the organization of both the 40th Army as a whole – bringing in extra *Spetsnaz* units, for example, and reorganizing the redundant chemical defence platoons into flame-thrower platoons – and also individual units. In a specific case involving the Panjshir, in spring 1984, the 108th Division's 285th Tank Regiment was converted into the 682nd Motor Rifle Regiment specifically because of the need to deploy more mechanized infantry into the valley. Large armoured units were essentially pointless in this battlespace, and also brought with them vulnerabilities such as the greater need for fuel and other supplies, whereas infantry units were far more useful for patrolling the valley floor. Rather than bringing in another unit from the USSR, which might have a negative political impact, it made sense simply to convert one. In the process, this actually expanded the 108th Division (because a mechanized regiment had almost double the strength of an armoured one) and gave it greater operational versatility, without altering the number of regiments in the 40th Army as a whole.

The T-62 tank, while not the most modern in the Soviet arsenal, was the workhorse of the 40th Army. (US DOD, Public Domain)

fertile Shomali Plains just north of Kabul and even taking part in combined *Jamiat-e Islami* raids as far as Balkh, 300km to the north-east. They had also taken advantage of the opportunity to reorganize and rearm, with the increasing flow of weapons coming through Pakistan. A Soviet assessment was that by 1984, every ten-man *mujahideen* team had an RPG-7 (or equivalent), that every *motorak* 30-man sub-group had a DShK HMG, a recoilless gun and two to three RPGs, and in addition a *motorak* would have at the very least an additional heavy weapons team with another four DShK and five recoilless rifles.

There was no formal end to the truce, and the Soviets did hold back from any major ground or even air activity in the valley for the rest of the year. Nonetheless, this was a time of 'phoney war' as both sides were aware that the conflict would restart, especially once the harsh winter had receded and conditions were again clear for both rebel raiding (snows and high winds made the mountain passes hard to traverse) and government attacks (which depended heavily on Soviet airpower).

In March 1984, Kabul claimed that Massoud had rejected the offer of extending the ceasefire. Although it is true that by the start of the year he had been avoiding meetings with 40th Army representatives, this is likely to have been an exaggeration for propaganda purposes. After all, the truce had always been with the Soviets, not the PDPA regime, and the rebels claimed not to have received any such offer. In any case, the political mood in Moscow had again changed. Andropov had died in February and he was succeeded by Konstantin Chernenko. Where Andropov was subtle, Chernenko was blunt; where Andropov worried about the cost of the war to the USSR's international standing, Chernenko worried about the impact of seeming to be weak in what he viewed as a proxy war against the West. Perhaps most important, the ailing, grey bureaucrat with no real support base or reputation – he was elected strictly as a compromise candidate because neither the reformists nor the hard-liners were strong enough to impose their own candidate – saw in Afghanistan a chance to make his name.

He was thus very open to Karmal's appeals for a new offensive, to sweep Massoud from the Panjshir for once and for all. Lieutenant-General

The Mi-24 was often used as a flying patrol, and here a gunship flies across the Shomali Plains in winter to ensure no attempts are made to raid the assembled 40th Army vehicles below. (Robert Nickelsberg/Liaison via Getty Images)

Leonid Generalov, who had replaced Yermakov as head of the 40th Army in November, was charged with preparing a new offensive, and under even more permissive rules of engagement than before. After all, this was a time when, under pressure from Chernenko to achieve quick results, the Soviets adopted unprecedentedly brutal methods, from high-altitude carpet bombing of rebel-held areas to attacks on refugee camps. By mid-1984, there were an estimated 3.5 million refugees in Pakistan and another 1.5 million in Iran. Mao had infamously likened revolutionaries to fish swimming in the sea of the population; the Soviets seemed determined to drain the sea, at least in areas where the *mujahideen* were strongest.

This maximalist approach was evident in *Panjshir VII*, which would be the largest and most brutal offensive to date. Karmal was demanding a bloody campaign and a total victory; Chernenko was inclined to give it to him; Generalov was somehow expected to achieve it. To this end, he mustered 33 battalions, a 15,000-strong force of 12,000 Soviet troops, including *Spetsnaz* and paratroopers, and 3,000 DRA Army and security troops under Brigadier Shahnawaz Tanai.

The reason for the disproportion was clear: while the DRA's forces had been steadily improving in discipline and reliability since 1980, they still were not trusted by the 40th Army's commanders, and generally with good reason. Operational security was often poor, indiscipline and desertion rife, and morale unpredictable: a unit which had seemed rock solid one day

***PANJSHIR VII*: ATTACKERS' ORBAT**

DRA
5th Regiment (8th Division)
23rd Regiment (20th Division)
37th Commando Brigade
444th Commando Battalion (2nd Division)
2nd *Sarandoy* Mobile Regiment

SOVIET
180th Motor Rifle Regiment
191st Independent Motor Rifle Regiment
395th Motor Rifle Regiment (201st Division)
682nd Motor Rifle Regiment (108th Division)
66th Independent Motor Rifle Brigade
783rd Independent Reconnaissance Battalion (201st Division)
1st Battalion (345th Independent Guards Airborne Regiment)
350th Guards Airborne Regiment (103rd Guards Airborne Division)
345th Independent Guards Airborne Regiment

could collapse the next. Generalov also made sure he would not have to stint on long-range firepower, assembling 39 artillery batteries, including 13 with MLR systems, as well as being able to draw on 194 airplanes based in both Afghanistan and the Soviet Union and 154 helicopters.

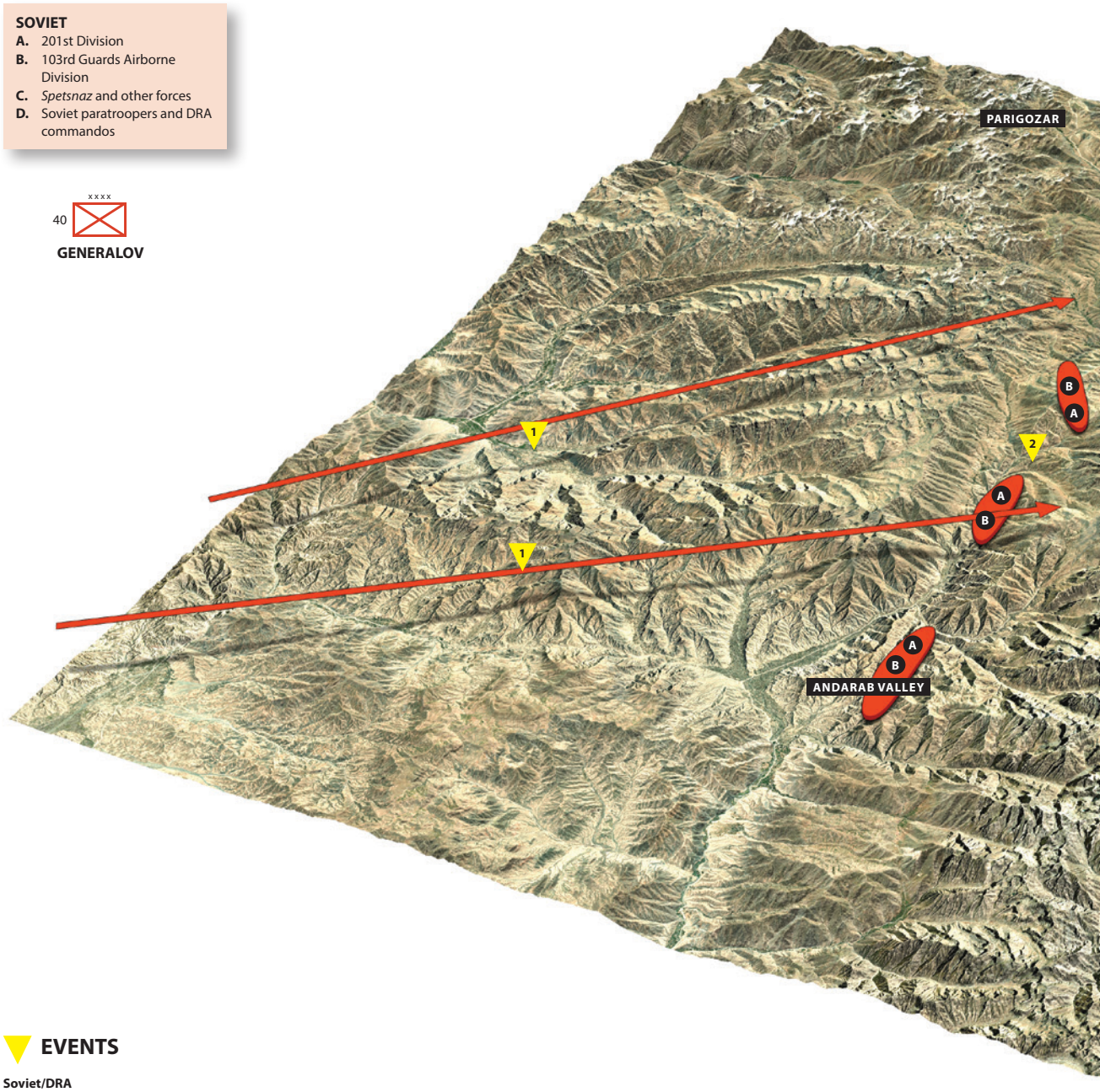
The plan was detailed and sensible, but despite certain tactical innovations, it was in the main unsubtle and familiar: a major mechanized drive along the valley, but this time accompanied by much more extensive use of blocking forces, with battalion-strength deployments at the main egress routes and substantial deployments by helicopter further down the side valleys to prevent the rebels from simply dispersing as usual. The aim was to force Massoud's men into direct engagements in which the Soviets' superior firepower could be brought to bear. Mindful of the challenges of controlling the Panjshir itself, this time the plan was not only to reactivate the garrisons abandoned as part of the truce, but to establish a much more extensive network of forts and strongpoints across the valley floor, with a greater concentration of Soviet forces to support – and, by implication, watch and control – the DRA Army, police and *Sarandoy* in place.

Mi-24 'flying tanks' operating with real ones in Afghanistan early in the war. (US DOD, Public Domain)

According to some accounts, Massoud was forewarned by figures within the Soviet command structure who cleaved to the Andropov line and disapproved of Chernenko's more muscular approach and his pandering to Karmal. This appears improbable, though – it is rather more likely that, given it took almost a month for the operation to be prepared and Massoud had agents in Kabul as well as sympathizers in nearby towns and many DRA units (as well as a steady flow of defectors), he was warned by Afghan sources. Either way, he clearly did have several weeks' notice, and a sense of the storm about to break. Not only did he step up preparations to resist the attack, but the civilians of the valley were advised to leave; many, though by no means all, did just that.

Originally, the plan was to launch the offensive at the end of March, but Kabul insisted on a delay because the *KhAD* hoped to be able to assassinate Massoud just before the attack and needed to get their agents in place. This did not come to anything, but nonetheless meant that *Panjshir VII* was delayed until mid-April, with the abortive assassination planned for 14 April and the offensive five days later. So, on 19 April 1984, the valley was subjected to a heavy bombardment from the air: fully four Tu-16 bomber regiments operating out of the Soviet Union and the first major use of Su-24 'Fencer' attack aircraft in the war, by the 149th Guards Bomber Squadron based at Alma-Ata in Soviet Kazakhstan. This highly capable all-weather aircraft could make low-level bombing runs and carried 'dumb' plus laser- and TV-guided bombs as well as an array of missiles, although in Afghanistan they largely were deployed just with 500kg and 1,500kg bombs.

Meanwhile, as a feint, elements of the Soviet 108th, 191st and 201st divisions and 395th Motor Rifle Regiment, as well as battalions from the



EVENTS

Soviet/DRA

1. 19 April: Massive preliminary bombing attacks are launched by Su-25s out of Bagram and Tu-16s and Su-24s flown from across the Soviet border.
2. Soviet blocking forces from the 201st Division and the 103rd Guards Airborne Division are deployed in the Andarab Valley and the Shatul Gorge.
3. DRA and Soviet forces stage operations up the Gorband Valley as a feint.
4. 22 April: *Spetsnaz* and other forces are inserted by helicopter to Dasht-e-Rawat to block rebel lines of retreat and resupply.
5. 23 April: A force of Soviet paratroopers and DRA commandos is airlifted to the centre of the valley to disrupt rebel operations and block any retreat.
6. 24 April: The first stage of the Soviet ground assault is launched, advancing to Anawa and engaging with the rebels' first defensive line.
7. After retaking Anawa, the main Soviet force pushes on to Rukha.
8. The Soviet ground assault continues past Rukha, assimilating the forces dropped north of Bazarak, to Khenj.

Massoud's Panjshir Front

i. Massoud's first defensive line is deployed before Anawa.

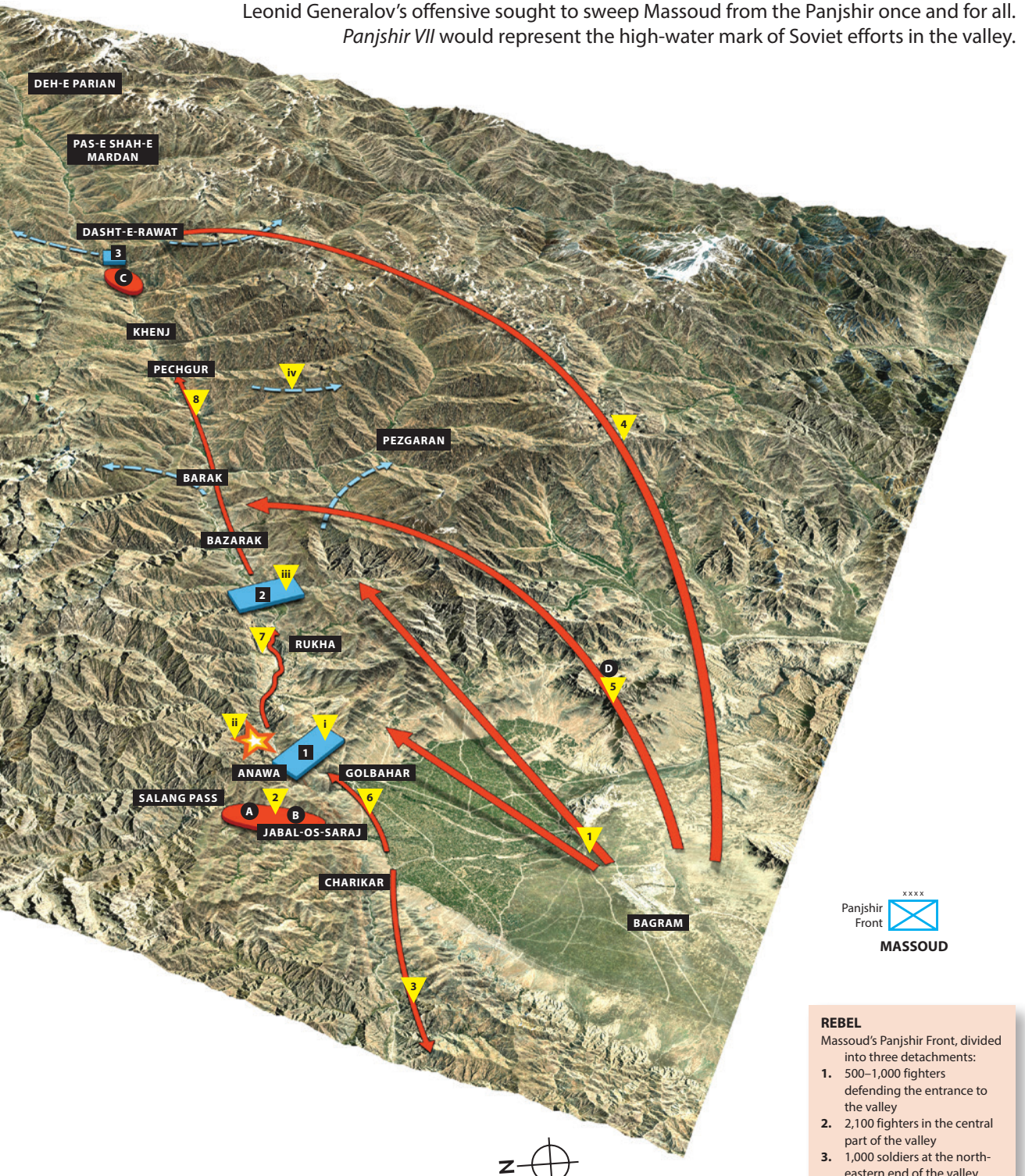
ii. 23 April: As the Soviet/DRA forces launch their offensive, the rebels storm the garrison in Anawa and briefly retake the town.

iii. The rebels' main defensive positions are organized between Rukha and Bazarak.

iv. Despite localized pitched battles, generally the rebels retreat and disperse in the face of the Soviet mechanized assault.

PANJSHIR VII, 1984

Panjshir VII would be the largest and most brutal Soviet/DRA offensive to date, mirroring a hardening of attitudes among the Soviet leadership. Lieutenant-General Leonid Generalov's offensive sought to sweep Massoud from the Panjshir once and for all. *Panjshir VII* would represent the high-water mark of Soviet efforts in the valley.



REBEL

Massoud's Panjshir Front, divided into three detachments:

1. 500–1,000 fighters defending the entrance to the valley
2. 2,100 fighters in the central part of the valley
3. 1,000 soldiers at the north-eastern end of the valley

Note: The base map shows an area of 138km x 115km.

The devastating impact of Soviet artillery barrages. The 'Red God of War' remained central to Soviet offensives in the Panjshir. (ITAR-TASS/Viktor Budan via Getty Images)

DRA's 8th and 20th Infantry divisions, had since 14 April been conducting an operation near the Gorband Valley to clear rebels from the Hairatan–Kabul highway route. Although they genuinely did start to comb the region and there were several firefights with *mujahideen*, the intention from the first was to distract Massoud, and these units were ready to be pivoted back to the Panjshir as soon as the main offensive was launched. At the same time, mechanized elements of the Soviet 201st Division and the 350th Guards Airborne Regiment of the 103rd Guards Airborne Division were quietly being deployed to the Andarab Valley, north of the Panjshir, to block any rebel retreat that way.

After two full days of bombing, including unusually some night-time operations from the Su-24s, on 22 April, the ground stage of the operation was launched. First of all, *Spetsnaz* from the 154th *OSN* along with paratroopers from the 345th Independent Guards Airborne Regiment were lifted by helicopter to the north-eastern end of the valley. Their main mission was to interdict any caravans of supplies or reinforcements from Pakistan, as well as deter *mujahideen* efforts to withdraw that way.

At the same time, at 0400hrs, fully 39 artillery batteries blasted the Panjshir Valley for 100 minutes of concentrated bombardment that even included the 152mm Giatsint howitzers of the 55th Guards Artillery Regiment, a Kabul-based unit under direct 40th Army subordination. Then the 191st Independent Motor Rifle Regiment invested the Shatul Gorge between the Panjshir and Salang valleys, to block any movement that way, and a column led by the 66th Brigade took a southern route into the Panjshir, with regiments of the 108th and 201st divisions forming the bulk of the columns.

The aim was first to clear the rebels from the south-western and central stretches of the Panjshir, then to continue across the floor and cut into the Andarab Valley to the north, into which the remaining rebels would presumably have withdrawn, only to be bottled up by the forces already there, to fix them in place for a conclusive engagement.

However, Massoud was waiting and prepared. An unprecedented number of mines had been laid throughout the Panjshir, but especially in likely helicopter landing zones, both on the flat and in the heights. This would

prove a particular challenge: when the 2nd Airborne Battalion of the 345th Independent Guards Airborne Regiment was being landed, a soldier tripped a captured Soviet OZM-72 'jumping' anti-personnel mine. This was right when they were disembarking from their helicopters and still bunched, so when it exploded in mid-air, two full platoons were within its 25m blast radius. Fully 13 were killed and 14 wounded in a hail of preformed shrapnel. This was all the more unnerving, as modern Western mines were now beginning to arrive in the valley, courtesy of the ISI and the CIA, including the first Italian-made Tecnovar TS-50 and Valsella VS-50 anti-personnel mines and Tecnovar TC/3.6 and TC/6 anti-tank mines. Largely made of plastic (with some non-magnetic metal parts) and thus very hard to detect before they detonated, these came as a distinctly unpleasant surprise to the Soviets.

Massoud's almost 5,000-strong forces were divided into three detachments. The first, of at least 500 fighters, and maybe a thousand, was the first line of defence, defending the entrance to the valley, seeking to delay the attack and inflict as many casualties as possible before dispersing. They had at least one captured T-55 tank at their disposal, as well as a disproportionate share of the Front's man-portable anti-tank weapons.

His main force, of around 2,100 fighters, was based in the central part of the valley and its first mission was to destroy the remaining Soviet–Afghan garrison in Anawa, to prevent it from becoming an advance firebase and artillery spotting position, and then to resist the main advance anchored around the defences established around Rukha and Bazarak. In pursuit of this mission, they had the bulk of the Panjshir Front's captured heavy equipment: a T-62 tank and at least two T-55s, as well as three D-30 howitzers and several Chinese-made Type 63 107mm multiple rocket launchers. A simple and dated design on a wheeled base, they were nonetheless provided by the Chinese as a suitably rugged weapon for guerrillas, and smuggled across the Pakistani border. If and when this mission was no longer viable, though, they would retreat towards the north-east, ambushing the attackers and launching harassing raids wherever possible.

Mujahideen on the move. Note the Kalashnikov rifle and RPG-7 grenade launcher, two of the staples of this war. (David Stewart-Smith/Getty Images)

Scouts from the 56th Independent Guards Air Assault Brigade on patrol refilling their water bottles from a mountain stream. Note their KLMK camouflage oversuits, a mark of Soviet special forces at the time. They are armed with folding-stock AKM-74 assault rifles and the nearest soldier is also carrying an RPO-A Shmel thermobaric rocket launcher, a weapon especially prized for dealing with *mujahideen* bunkers. (E. Kuvakin, CC-BY-SA 3.0)

Finally, just over a thousand soldiers were placed at the north-eastern end of the valley to fight off the anticipated Soviet airborne assault and keep open the lines of retreat through the Howak and Zurna gorges, into Andarab, if a general withdrawal from the Panjshir was unavoidable.

As soon as the air campaign began, Massoud began withdrawing some of his forces towards Andarab and Khost wa Fereng to the north, both to protect them from the bombing and also to secure lines of retreat against the anticipated deployment of interdiction forces. He left behind his best *motoraks* and heavy weapons – especially anti-tank guns, anti-air units and recoilless rifles – to prepare for the ground attack.

First, Soviet helicopters lifted a substantial assault force of 2,000 soldiers to the centre of the valley, north-east of Bazarak. Comprising the *VDV*'s 345th and 350th Guards Airborne regiments and the DRA's 444th Commando Battalion, their mission was to seize the area and block any retreat by the rebels now facing the main armoured attack. This was spearheaded by the 395th Motor Rifle Regiment, which reached Rukha on 24 April and would in due course push all the way to Khenj, supported by other elements of the 201st Motor Rifle Division. The snows still thick in the upper valley prevented mechanized forces from going further, but a battalion of the 350th Guards Airborne Regiment was lifted by helicopter to Dasht-e-Rawat to block any rebel movements there.

Massoud's forces could not withstand this assault, but nonetheless made their preparations count, with a series of large-scale ambushes that in several cases inflicted serious local losses on the attackers, even in the latter days of the operation when most had withdrawn from the valley. On 30 April, for example, the 682nd Motor Rifle Regiment's 1st Battalion was caught in an ambush by a *motorak* which had managed to conceal itself in cliff-side caves. The Soviets suffered 53 dead and 58 wounded, an unusually bad ratio of KIA to WIA explained by their inability to rescue their wounded, who were killed where they lay. Likewise, on 4 May, the 201st Division's 783rd Independent Reconnaissance Battalion – reckoned to be amongst the best scouts in the

40th Army – were nonetheless suckered into a trap, losing 13 dead in half an hour's fighting.

On 5 May, the operation was officially ended and most forces were withdrawn. Rukha became the base for a substantial Soviet force, initially the 682nd Motor Rifle Regiment of the 108th Division, which would remain there for the next three years and ten months. It suffered weekly, and sometimes daily, attacks, from sporadic sniping to night-time raids, and 'standing in Rukha' became 40th Army slang for being stuck in an unpleasant duty. The 2nd Battalion of the 345th Independent Guards Airborne Regiment continued to provide the core of the contingent in Anawa, while extensive DRA forces, including a *Sarandoy* Operational Battalion and a Mountain Battalion, were deployed to the Panjshir in a network of posts as far up the valley as Pechgur, just south of Khenj.

However uncomfortable duty in the valley may have been, there is no doubt that the presence of substantial Soviet garrisons did represent a serious obstacle to Massoud's efforts to re-establish his Panjshir Front. For a while, he was forced to leave the valley, while *KhAD* agents and *Spetsnaz* teams hunted him. Nonetheless, Radio Kabul announced: 'We bring you the good news that the criminal gang of Ahmad Shah no longer exists. We invite you and all noble inhabitants of the Panjshir wherever you are to return to your homes and resume your peaceful life.' On 6 May, a clearly delighted Babrak Karmal was even able to make a visit to the Panjshir for propaganda purposes – the first such visit since 1979.

However, Massoud was used to overcoming obstacles, and even the 40th Army's own staff quietly and glumly admitted amongst themselves and in their briefings to Moscow that *Panjshir VII* had been another tactical success but strategic failure. Abdul Wahed, one of Massoud's trusted sub-commanders, had his foot blown off by one of the PFM-1 'butterfly mines' the Soviets scattered by helicopter along potential rebel tracks and was captured, to be paraded before the government's TV cameras. But the 'Lion' himself was still at liberty. Much of the rebels' defensive infrastructure in the valley had been destroyed, but this did not prevent them from launching offensive missions.

Over time, the Soviets came to realize the importance of trying to control the rebels' capacity freely to muster in and move through the Panjshir and establish a network of *zastavas*, strongpoints. Here, an Mi-24 gunship dips into the valley past one such post, in an old fort. (DOUGLAS E. CURRAN/AFP via Getty Images)

The Soviet/DRA casualties had also been substantial: perhaps a thousand men, disproportionately from elite units, whose loss would be felt in the coming months. *Panjshir VII* represented the high-water mark of Soviet efforts in the Panjshir, a sop to Karmal's and Chernenko's dreams of winning a military victory in what was as much a political conflict.

PANJSHIR VIII, SEPTEMBER 1984: KEEPING MASSOUD OFF-BALANCE

By this time, *Jamiat-e Islami* had emerged as arguably the most effective and extensive of the various rebel factions. To the east, the Herat Front under Ismail Khan, a former army officer, had expanded to an estimated 12,000 fighters. To the north, the Marmoul Front was even larger, and not only had launched attacks on the government stronghold of Mazar-I Sharif, but its base in the Marmoul Gorge had weathered several sustained attacks. *Panjshir VII* had put Massoud's forces on the defensive, though, and in 1984, the Herat Front found itself facing a particularly tough campaign of high-altitude bombing and brutal attacks on villages suspected of harbouring rebels, another result of Chernenko's futile but nonetheless sincere efforts to end the war through escalation. By autumn, a combination of disrupted resupply routes and rural depopulation – they relied on locals for food and recruits – meant that they were retrenching rather than maintaining their former tempo of operations.

The Marmoul Front was later to be plunged into even worse chaos when, in December, its leader, Abdul Qader, who went by the *nom de guerre* Zabiullah Khan, was killed by a command-detonated mine. This was likely a *Spetsnaz* or *KGB* operation, but given the violent competition between his men and the more radical Sunni, Islamic-backed Pashtun *Harakat-e Islami-yi Afghanistan* (Islamic Movement of Afghanistan), it is still entirely possible that this was a 'green on green' killing. In any case, Zabiullah Khan's energy

The An-12 'Cub' was a workhorse of the Soviet Military Transport Aviation, a four-engine turboprop that could carry a hundred paratroopers or 20 tonnes of cargo, and operate from rough landing strips. In Afghanistan, it also acquired an infamous extra role as the most common 'Black Tulip' aircraft used to bring the bodies of the fallen home. (US DOD, Public Domain)

and charisma had been a powerful factor behind the unification of disparate local militias and warlords into a single force, and this led to a period of internal disunity and dismay.

Generally, the 40th Army and the Kabul regime appear to have decided to devote particular efforts into disrupting the *Jamiat-e Islami* and in September, another minor offensive was launched in the Panjshir to hinder Massoud's efforts to regroup, especially in connection with the withdrawal of the last manoeuvre forces which had been involved in the previous offensive (bar the garrisons). Indeed, *Panjshir VIII* itself was really more of a coda to *Panjshir VII* rather than a fully fledged operation in its own right.

On 5 September, high-altitude bombing raids were resumed during the four-day celebration of *Eid-e-Qurban*, the 'Festival of the Sacrifice', holiest of the two Islamic holidays celebrated worldwide every year, in a cold-blooded calculation that the rebels would be concentrated at prayer. It was cynical but it was also successful, and according to *mujahideen* sources, more than 200 of their number were killed. Su-25s then carried out lower-level strikes on supply routes in the upper valley, while Mi-24 helicopter gunships patrolled the side valleys.

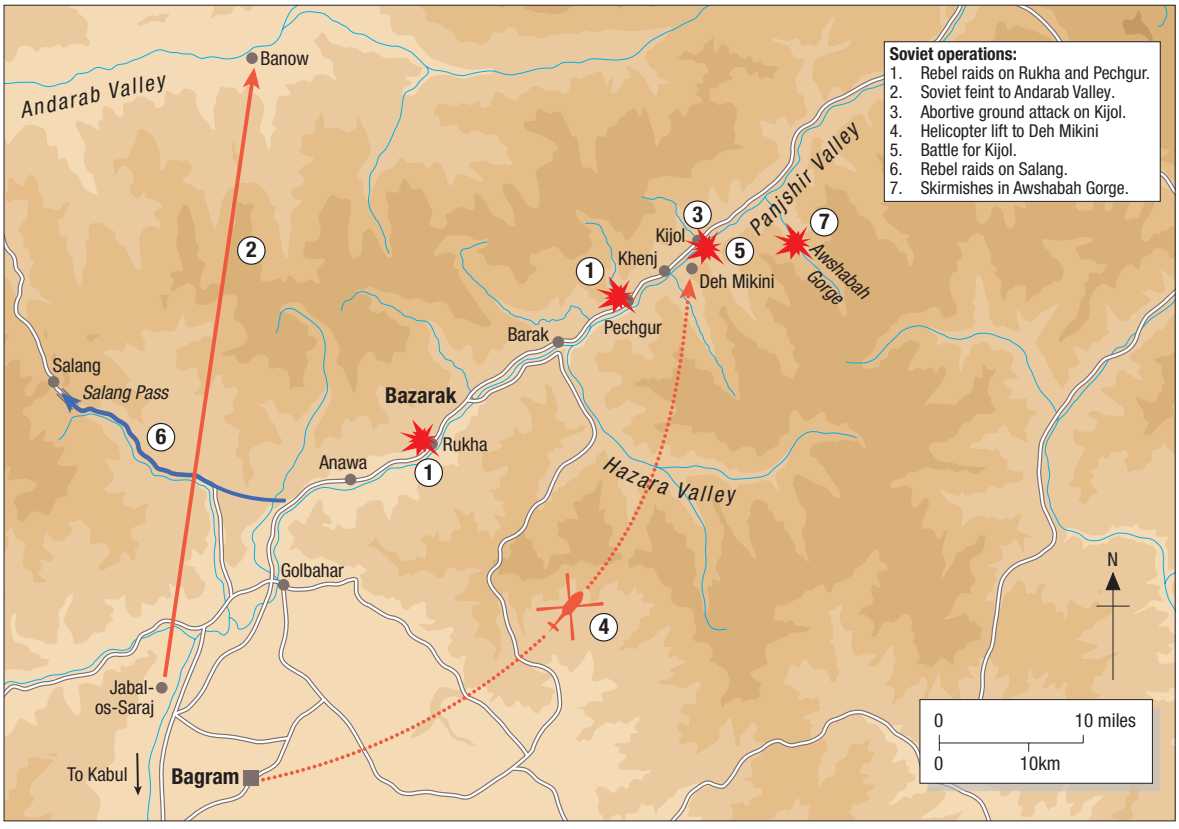
This was a prelude to a series of small-scale landings of company- or battalion-strength *VDV* and *Spetsnaz* contingents in the upper valley and heights, intended to interdict caravans, destroy remaining (or repaired) rebel infrastructure and disperse *mujahideen* concentrations just before the winter bit. Uncertain whether this was a prelude to a more sustained attack, the rebels went to ground, and this also relieved some of the pressure on the garrisons and patrols on the valley floor. It was, however, intended as little more than a demonstration of Soviet capacities and a disruption of Massoud's efforts, and by the middle of September, the 'offensive', such as it was, had ended, although periodic patrols by helicopter gunships and patrols of the nearer side valleys would continue as a matter of routine.

PANJSHIR IX, JUNE 1985: THE REPRISAL

In Moscow, it was time for another state funeral. Chernenko died in March 1985, the third General Secretary to go in fewer than three years. He was replaced by the younger reformer, Mikhail Gorbachev, who from the first had had severe doubts about the wisdom of the invasion of Afghanistan. That said, he had only a razor-thin majority in the Communist Party's Central Committee and although he was keen to see Soviet forces withdrawn, he could not move too far, too fast, lest he alienate the hawks. It would take him two years to organize an international agreement allowing him to bring the soldiers home with some semblance of honour and accomplish the even harder task of persuading the Party elite that it was necessary to staunch what he would later call this 'bleeding wound'.

For the moment, what that meant was that the pressure for major offensives was withdrawn, yet Gorbachev would not stand in the way of any operations that the 40th Army, now under Lieutenant-General Igor Rodionov, recommended. They continued at quite an active tempo, but – with the exception of the division-strength relief of Barikot in the Kunar Valley in May – they tended to be short, sharp search-and-destroy operations to disperse *mujahideen* concentrations or retaliate for their attacks.

Panjshir IX, June 1985



Meanwhile, responsibility for garrisoning the Panjshir had been turned over largely to DRA forces, with the 10th Brigade of the 20th Division being based at Rukha, a regiment of the 8th Division deployed to the north, as far as Khenj, and the 38th Commando Brigade mounting patrols throughout. Their five garrisons also included a *Sarandoy* operational brigade (really a battalion-strength unit of 500 men on paper, 444 in reality) at Pechgur, whose fate would trigger the final Panjshir offensive.

After all, at the same time, Massoud had been rebuilding his forces, and in spring had launched an aggressive and increasingly ambitious series of attacks, intended as much as anything else to restore the morale of his men and regain the Panjshir Front's reputation.

In June, three *motoraks* launched a raid on DRA forces at Rukha and destroyed an ammunition dump with 107mm rockets, either fired from Type 63 launchers or individually from jury-rigged launchers that were little more than a metal tube on a stand. Then, in what proved the decisive move, the rebels seized Pechgur. First a *motorak* under Massoud himself blocked the road to Bazarak, capturing the security posts on the heights around the town. Then another *motorak* infiltrated the base under cover of an artillery barrage. After just an hour and a half's fighting, the garrison surrendered. General Ahmaddodin, chief of staff of the DRA's Central Corps, had been in Pechgur on an inspection tour at the time and was killed in the attack, and two T-55 tanks were destroyed, but otherwise the rebels took ten mortars,

Sarandoy, the Interior Ministry's gendarmerie, were an integral element of the DRA's security apparatus. Although their coordination with the military often fell victim to inter-agency rivalry, they could at times fight well. Here, *Sarandoy* from the 3rd Regiment man a battered BMP-1 IFV. As was usual in Afghanistan, given the rebels' lack of armour, the 9M14 'Sagger' wire-guided anti-tank missile above the gun has been removed. (Robert Nickelsberg/ The LIFE Images Collection via Getty Images)

four 76mm M1942 ZiS-3 guns and 126 captives, who were marched into the mountains.

What happened next is still hotly disputed. A Soviet heliborne force was dispatched to rescue the prisoners (especially as they included several other senior officers, who had been on General Ahmaddodin's staff). Kabul claimed they were executed by the *mujahideen*, shot and cut to pieces with knives when it was feared that they might be rescued. The rebels asserted, by contrast, that Soviet gunships caught the combined party of rebels and captives in the open and raked it with gun and missile fire, killing many of the *Sarandoy*. Although the truth of the matter has never been ascertained, it is worth noting that while Massoud in the past had enjoined his men to treat captives with honour (not least as many then defected to the *mujahideen* ranks), and the Soviets could be undiscriminating in their treatment of Afghans, all the captives were killed, and it is unlikely for any attack to be so universally lethal.

Either way, the Pechgur raid caused a scandal in Kabul and demanded a response. Rodionov gave the mission to his chief of staff, Major-General Viktor Dubynin (who would later succeed him as 40th Army commander), who operated out of a command post in Bagram. A week later, on 16 June, the last Panjshir offensive was launched, a reprisal more than anything else.

While a small mechanized force was deployed towards Banow in the Andarab Valley as the usual distraction, a battalion of the Soviet 345th Independent Guards Airborne Regiment and 250 soldiers from the DRA's 38th Commando Brigade was readied to be deployed from Bagram by helicopter to Deh Mikini, some 80km up the Panjshir, with a view to then advancing to the rebels' stronghold at Kijol. The village was in rebel hands, so first a ground assault was launched to clear it. DRA forces tried to force the route, supported by Soviet tanks, but the fighting was brutal and the Afghans proved unwilling to brave the rebels' fire. In his memoirs, Dubynin was very critical of them, saying they should have been able to reach Kijol by then, but 'the Afghans are fighting very poorly. Many try to desert, they don't want to fight, and they are cunning. Almost the majority are in solidarity with the dushmans [rebels]. In six months, 16,000 were drafted into the army, and more than 14,000 deserted.'

In later years, as the insurgency in Afghanistan spread, the same soldiers, equipment and experience would be put to use closer to home. Here, Soviet Border Troops mounted in an Mi-8 apprehend Afghans who were smuggling Chinese weapons into Turkmenistan, in 1991. (Robert Wallis/Corbis via Getty Images)

In fairness, though, it would take even a larger force of Soviet paratroopers almost another fortnight to reach Kijol, and many DRA troops also distinguished themselves with their bravery, despite the amount of firepower the well-prepared *mujahideen* could deploy, not least with a few Oerlikon 20mm autocannon that had recently been added to their arsenal thanks to the CIA. As Rodionov later recalled, 'The tanks that returned from the front looked like hedgehogs, studded with the steel armour-piercing cores of large-calibre DShK bullets, coming back with broken sights, headlights. Everything not covered by armour was destroyed.'

There were two bridges across the Panjshir River in that sector, and both were blown up, so on 17 June, 32 helicopters lifted an assault force to the foothills of the Didak Heights beyond, close to Deh Mikini, while scouts from the 56th Independent Guards Air Assault Brigade made their way over the ridgeline to engage with the rebels, who were forced to withdraw. Deh Mikini was then taken, and Dubynin's forces then began clearing the immediate vicinity and pushing towards Kijol.

It turned into a messy, bloody brawl, with Dubynin recollecting that it was made doubly difficult by constant calls from Moscow (probably by Rodionov's bête noire, General Zaitsev) with requests for updates and micromanaging instructions. DRA forces did manage briefly to take Kijol, but were then dislodged by a rebel counter-attack, Over the next ten days, his three-regiment force, supported by two squadrons of Mi-24 gunships and fire from 2B9 Vasilyok 82mm gun-mortars, systematically destroyed the dense network of rebel bunkers and strongpoints, while themselves enduring a steady stream of sniping, rocket fire and night-time raids, but their progress towards Kijol was slow. The rebels' extensive use of mines was a particular

problem for the mechanized forces, as regular Soviet troops were neither trained nor comfortable fighting away from their vehicles. The regular Soviet bombing raids had also left their share of unexploded ordnance that the rebels became adept at repurposing; in one case, a FAB-1500 heavy iron bomb was used to make a command-detonated mine that blew a BMP-2 IFV fully 15m, killing the driver and commander.

In order to try to divert the 40th Army's attention, Massoud ordered diversionary attacks in the Salang Pass. Two convoys were engaged with rocket fire and ambushes, and an oil pipeline running alongside the road was ruptured. The ensuing blaze only added to the carnage, and two BTR-60 APCs and seven trucks were destroyed. The 180th Regiment was deployed to strengthen the existing security forces in the Salang, but Dubynin retained his focus and decided to take a leaf out of Massoud's book and try to take Kijol at night.

By dawn on 28 June, Soviet paratroopers under Lieutenant-Colonel Deriglazov, commander of the 345th Independent Guards Airborne Regiment, had reached the main intersection of Kijol, taking heavy losses in the process, but they then came under withering fire from rebel positions and could get no further. The roads were cratered and mined, so the Soviets could not reinforce them with armoured units. The situation became even more tense, with paratroopers and rebels engaging in sporadic but close and violent firefights. The *mujahideen* had the advantage of not only higher ground, but also a network of firing positions built from caves in the Awshabah Gorge, some of which had even been fitted with blast doors and rails for DShK HMGs. In practice, they were largely impervious to Soviet artillery and airpower, and needed to be destroyed one by one with direct fire from tank guns and shoulder-fired heavy weapons – the RPO Rys napalm rocket launcher proved especially effective – or taken at close quarters with gun and grenade.

Meanwhile, Massoud's raiders continued to cause chaos in the Salang and even made daring incursions onto the Kabul Plain. On 7 July, a raid within sight of Bagram left ten fuel tankers and 15 cargo trucks destroyed, and

Relaxed Soviet troops on a BMP-2 IFV on the Shomali Plains. The redesign that led to the BMP-2 was heavily influenced by the lessons of Afghanistan, including the replacement of the 73mm low-pressure gun with a 30mm autocannon with a higher angle of fire, able to rake valley sides. (Patrick ROBERT/Sygma via Getty Images)

STINGER MISSILE ATTACK ON A SOVIET MI-8 HELICOPTER (PP. 82–83)

The Soviets' monopoly of the air was a perennial challenge for the rebels. Initially they had to rely on light anti-aircraft guns and the relatively few Soviet-built SA-7 shoulder-fired missiles they could acquire, although 40th Army quickly withdrew them from issue precisely to try to avoid them ending up in rebel hands. Having received some Chinese-made analogues and British Shorts Blowpipes, neither of which did much to change the situation, in 1986, US FIM-92 Stinger missiles (**1**) began appearing on the battlefield. As usual, Massoud's Panjshir Front would receive arguably less than their share, not least because of Pakistan's influence. They proved a much more effective system, although their actual impact on the war is debatable considering that by then the Soviets were already scaling back their operations, and they very quickly introduced new tactics and equipment to foil the missile. Nonetheless, this became a symbolic turning point in the conflict and certainly gave the rebels a system able to punish low-flying attackers.

At this stage, the conflict had become increasingly an obvious proxy war between the USSR and the USA, as well as a subject of global media attention. The more politically astute rebels, including Massoud, used this to their advantage, cooperating with the media to tell their story. Likewise, Western intelligence agencies in some cases helped frame and magnify the coverage, both to embarrass Moscow and also make their case for continued support for the rebels. Reflecting this, here a Panjshiri *mujahed* (**2**) is firing a Stinger at a banking Mi-8 helicopter (**3**) in late 1987. He is being filmed by a Western cameraman (**4**). The latter is accompanied by what is likely an intelligence officer (**5**); underneath his waistcoat a shoulder-holster rigged for left-hand draw can be seen. A rebel armed with a folding stock AK-47 (**6**) also looks on. The scene is set against a backdrop of wintry snow-capped hills and rugged Panjshir mountains.

The Stinger's launch motor (**7**) that ejects the missile from the launch tube has now separated from the missile, which is now a safe distance (about 9m) from the *mujahed*. The missile's dual thrust flight motor has ignited, and the missile is now armed. The Stinger will enter a sustained flight phase until it strikes its target, or the propellant is consumed. By this time, Soviet helicopters were being fitted with flare dispensers to try to divert incoming missiles, and exhaust baffles to hinder lock-on, but at this close range neither countermeasure would be likely to have much effect.

Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and US President Ronald Reagan sign the INF nuclear arms treaty in 1987. Gorbachev's desire to restore good relations with the West also demanded a withdrawal from Afghanistan. (Executive Office of the President of the United States, Public Domain)

although helicopter gunships were scrambled, most of the rebels managed to disengage and lie low until nightfall.

Bit by bit, though, the Soviets were able to get the upper hand, especially once they had cleared the way to bring up the T-62 tanks of the 191st Independent Motor Rifle Regiment. Although it was in many ways a wasteful approach, the tanks' 115mm guns became used for counter-sniper fire and to clear gun pits, even though the snipers took to blinding the tanks by targeting their sights, forcing the Soviets to keep bringing up replacements and running a field repair shop just behind the lines. Nonetheless, by this point the tide of battle had turned, and on 11 July, the rebels began to disengage and withdraw, in good order. By 16 July, the fighting was over.

The butcher's bill was significant, though: this was, relative to the length of the fighting and the number of combatants on each side, the bloodiest of all the Panjshir offensives. The Soviet/DRA forces lost 2,000 dead and injured out of some 11,000 deployed, the rebels between 500 and 1,000. Later, Colonel-General Mayev, who as a colonel had been the 40th Army's Deputy Commander for Armaments, called the operation 'very difficult, one of the bloodiest in the history of the Afghan war'. And for what? The Soviets declared, as ever, the operation a success, and they had indeed retaken Kijol and inflicted casualties on Massoud's forces. However, the rebels' capacity and will to put up a tenacious defence and take on the government and Soviet troops in toe-to-toe, close-quarters battle, rather than simply disperse, demonstrated the extent to which Massoud was turning a guerrilla force into an increasingly well-armed and well-organized insurgency. Although the parallel is not exact, one Soviet *GRU* officer who had previously served as an advisor in Vietnam compared this with the way the Viet Cong formed the People's Liberation Armed Forces of South Vietnam after 1954 as part of a similar transition.

AFTERMATH

Panjshir IX was the last serious offensive in the valley. In 1986, Gorbachev was finally in a position to announce his intention of withdrawing Soviet forces from Afghanistan, and under its last two commanders, lieutenant-generals Dubynin and Boris Gromov, the priority of the 40th Army shifted largely to defensive operations and preparations for withdrawal.

Massoud wisely took this as an opportunity not to provoke any reprisals, and a tacit ceasefire resulted that allowed him to continue to recruit, train and organize the Panjshir Front but also for the remaining inhabitants of the valley to return to some semblance of normal life. In 1986, the Soviets engineered Karmal's replacement with Dr Mohammad Najibullah, the former head of the *KhAD*. An able and ruthless operator, Najibullah, like Karmal, continued to try to push the Soviets into a more confrontational stance, even seeking to provoke Massoud into incautious attacks. The Lion of Panjshir knew when not to show his teeth, though, and by this time there were also regular back-channel contacts with the Soviet command, through the *GRU*. Whereas the *KGB* and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze felt that Moscow ought wholeheartedly to support Najibullah, the military – especially Deputy Defence Minister General Valentin Varennikov, who was

When the Soviets engineered Karmal's replacement with Mohammad Najibullah, as president of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and General Secretary of the PDPA, they hoped the former *KhAD* chief would prove a more effective and manageable figure. But he also had his own agenda, as his endeavours to foil Varennikov's efforts to negotiate directly with Massoud demonstrated. (Patrick ROBERT/Sygma via Getty Images)

the defence minister's personal representative in Kabul in the latter years of the war, and Lieutenant-General Mikhail Sotskov, who became Chief Military Advisor in Kabul in 1988 – favoured a power-sharing political deal with Massoud. This was an approach also favoured by DRA defence minister Shahnawaz Tanai (who had fought in the Panjshir previously as commander of the 37th Commando Brigade) and interior minister Seid Gulyabzoi. This came to nothing, though – Varennikov found Najibullah's hatred of Massoud 'pathological' – and the rivalry with Tanai and Gulyabzoi would eventually doom Najibullah.

Instead, Massoud was able to extend the Panjshir Front's authority by a mix of military operations and the incorporation of other rebel groups, especially as the Marmoul Front had never really got beyond the death of its leader. From the valley, he soon became dominant in the whole Parwan Province, and over time pushed his influence into Baghlan and Takhar provinces, too. At the end of 1985, the Council of the North unified various guerrilla movements in the north-east of the country, and although open to all, it was in effect dominated by Tajiks and the *Jamiat-e Islami*, and that really meant Massoud. He would use this new-found authority to stage attacks elsewhere, such as the abortive attack on Eshkamish in Takhar Province, base of the DRA's 75th Brigade in 1986, and a subsequent successful raid on Farkhar in Baghlan Province. When outside the Panjshir, Massoud was likewise considered fair game by the Soviets; in June 1986, for example, *Spetsnaz* and helicopter-borne air assault troops tried to ambush him in the Khejob Valley. However, the truce in the Panjshir itself held.

Varennikov resisted Najibullah's calls for a last offensive against the Panjshir Front to prevent it from taking advantage of the Soviet withdrawal. Instead, in a secret report back to Defence Minister Marshal Dmitry Yazov, he wrote:

> In our view, accepting the president's proposal to bring the 40th Army into battle with A. Shah [Massoud] could put our troops in a very difficult position during the second phase of their withdrawal from Afghanistan. Undoubtedly, there would be additional major losses, and the organization of their withdrawal in general could be disrupted. At the same time, achieving the main goal – the destruction of A. Shah – is impossible, since it is necessary to know where he is located, and this is impossible because Afghan intelligence has not been able to do this over the past eight years.

Instead, along with Soviet ambassador Yuli Vorontsov, he asked Colonel Tkachyov to try to arrange a meeting with the elusive Massoud in 1988. They had had to inform Najibullah, who acquiesced without any enthusiasm, but each time they tried to hold the talks, the site was first bombed or shelled by the DRA forces, pre-empting any chance to meet. It was clear the Kabul government would do anything to try to prevent direct negotiations, and this is a case study in the way that even apparent proxies have agendas of their own.

Nonetheless, negotiations did take place, albeit indirectly through *GRU* agents. The Soviet garrisons in the Panjshir were evacuated in 1988, and with them retreated the DRA security forces, as they knew they could not survive outside the 40th Army's protection. When Lieutenant-General Gromov organized the withdrawal of Soviet forces via the Salang Pass,

General Valentin Varennikov was no liberal – he was involved in the attempted coup against Gorbachev in 1991 and here is seen later with Putin – but he was also a realist, and drove efforts to reach a truce with Massoud in the latter years of the war. (Kremlin.ru, CC BY 3.0)

Massoud's forces did nothing to try to take advantage of the opportunity. In part, this was because of these back-channel contacts, in part a sense that, as one of his lieutenants put it, he 'faced a far more pressing priority than wasting bullets on retreating Soviets'. Even so, in January 1989, the lower Panjshir experienced one last, massive battering by Soviet aviation and artillery. In part, this was a warning, in part a last chance to weaken his forces and forestall any kind of dash for Kabul as the *OKSVA* made its farewells.

ASSESSMENT

So how far did the struggle for the Panjshir – just one of the many battlefields of this messy and vicious war – truly matter, and how did it affect the wider conflict? Ultimately, the fight over the valley did not make or break the military side of the conflict. As a rebel stronghold close to Kabul and the Salang Pass, it certainly forced both the DRA and 40th Army to devote resources to protecting the capital and its supply lines that could have been used elsewhere. It also consumed more than its share of the direct attention of successive 40th Army commanders – reading their interviews and memoirs, it is striking how often Massoud and the '*Pandsheretsky*' threat arises compared with other fronts, other rebels.

Massoud had been able to build a fighting force of increasing size and sophistication even under successive Soviet-led offensives. Whether or not it had indeed already been making the transition from guerrilla movement to rebel army, the relaxation of pressure from the Soviets certainly allowed it to become one from 1988. He would increasingly be able to mount set-piece offensives, such as the seizure of the headquarters of the DRA's 20th Infantry Division in Nahrin in neighbouring Baghlan Province, a victory that won him considerable prestige and also substantial supplies of heavy weapons. While Najibullah's regime would survive until 1992, not least thanks to his shrewd playing of tribal politics and his attempts to create a 'national reconciliation' government, the Panjshir was essentially an autonomous state within a state long before then.

Insurgencies are essentially political struggles, though, and the importance of the Panjshir in this respect ought not to be underestimated. At a time when many other rebel movements waxed and waned, it represented a consistent and inspirational example of successful defiance. This was eventually manifest in the Council of the North, arguably the most meaningful of the regional alliances and in many ways the spiritual forefather of the later, anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. Likewise, at a time when *mujahideen* were almost as eager to undermine and compete with each other, Massoud – though not above a spot of empire-building and political jostling – was unusually willing to work with and support others. This also played into the military struggle, as many groups went to the Panjshir to study the tactical lessons hard-learned by his men through successive offensives. The *Jamiat-e Islami*

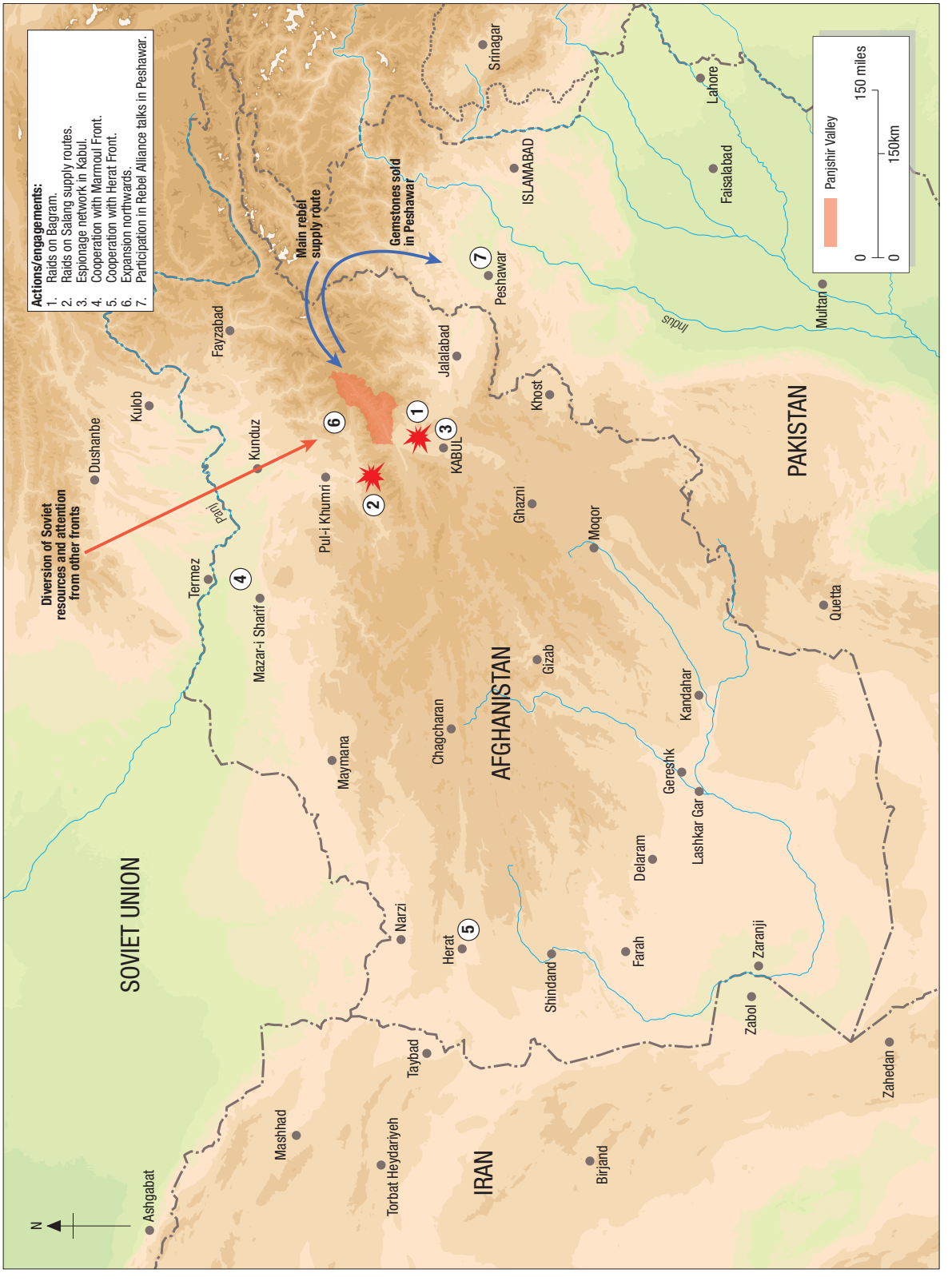
forces in Mazar to the north, for example, directly adopted his sectoral style of organizing resistance, as well as his military model.

The Soviets learned much from their ten-year war in Afghanistan, even though post-Soviet Russia would have to re-learn a great deal of it the hard way in Chechnya in the 1990s. A generation of tactical leaders was blooded, and the helicopter truly came into its own in Moscow's military thinking. The concepts of 'initiative' and small-unit leadership began to be taken seriously. All kinds of kit, from the AK-74 rifle to the BMP-2 IFV, were given a real test of fire, with numerous modifications and improvements made as a result. The Panjshir was a particular laboratory of war, witnessing some of the largest and most complex helicopter operations, early deployments of improvised gun-trucks mounting twin ZU-23 anti-aircraft autocannon to be able to rake the valley crests, and the baptism of fire of the formidable Su-25 close air support jet. It is striking how often lessons drawn specifically from the Panjshir crop up in military autopsies of the war, even to this day.

However, the real lesson learned when the Bear of Moscow met the Lion of Panjshir was precisely of the difficulty in suppressing a genuinely popular insurgency, especially when fought in rough terrain and led by a leader of both ability and charisma, and doubly so when in the name of supporting a corrupt, unpopular regime. The Soviets could have beaten Massoud; they could have flooded the Panjshir with soldiers (the General Staff had said that to guarantee victory in Afghanistan as a whole would take half a million men), driven out every citizen, bombed every square centimetre. But the cost – military, economic, moral, political – would have been exorbitant, out of proportion with the result. Moscow had never really been enthusiastic about the PDPA or committed to this war, and had always tried to fight it on the cheap, putting in only a fraction of the effort that, for example, the USA would squander in Vietnam. Massoud and the rebels of the Panjshir, though, would illustrate the fundamental dilemma: that the *mujahideen* could not defeat the Soviets, but nor could they be defeated. They were fighting not for an unwelcoming foreign country but their own homes, and ultimately, they could – and did – outlast the Soviets.

Veterans of the Afghan war drink toasts during a rally in Vladikavkaz on 15 February 2009, marking the 20th anniversary of the withdrawal. (KAZBEK BASAYEV/AFP via Getty Images)

The Panjshir Valley in the wider war



THE BATTLEFIELD TODAY

After the Soviet withdrawal, the Panjshir continued to be independent of Kabul, with Massoud rejecting efforts to inveigle him into Najibullah's 'national reconciliation' regime. So long as Kabul continued to receive generous support from Moscow, the regime endured, but with the collapse of the USSR at the end of 1991 and the abrupt end to all aid, it became increasingly weak and unstable, its control over the country shrinking month by month. In March 1992, Najibullah agreed to hand power to a *mujahideen* coalition government, which met in Peshawar in Afghanistan to hammer out terms, leading to the formation of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan under *Jamiat-e Islami* founder and leader Burhanuddin Rabbani. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar instead opted to try to take Kabul for himself, and this triggered a complex civil war in which Massoud emerged as one of the dominant leaders and the republic's defence minister. Out of the chaos yet another faction emerged, the ultra-religious Taliban, and in 1995 it was Massoud who prevented them from seizing Kabul, although they would later occupy the city in 1996, after he had withdrawn his forces.

The Taliban declared the formation of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and introduced a brutal and oppressive regime based on the strictest of interpretations of Islamic sharia law. In response, Massoud joined Rabbani in forming the Northern Alliance, initially largely of Tajiks but increasingly uniting other ethnic groups and factions (and ironically numbering Russia amongst its supporters). While Pakistan supported the Taliban with money, arms and eventually soldiers, it was unable to defeat the Northern Alliance, although in the ensuing conflict hundreds of thousands more Afghans would die.

The instability also allowed the al-Qaeda jihadist terror network under Osama bin Laden (who had long disliked Massoud) and Ayman al-Zawahiri to establish itself in Afghanistan, under the wing of the Taliban, from 1996. It was al-Qaeda that ultimately accomplished what the *KhAD* and the *KGB* had not, assassinating Massoud in a suicide attack on 9 September 2001, right before the 9/11 attacks. In the ensuing US-led campaign against al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the Northern Alliance – which by that

Massoud's tomb in Panjshir, under construction and under guard, while being visited by a delegation of US Marines in 2007 to leave an engraved tablet as a token of respect. Note the Afghan National Army soldier in parade dress next to the picture of Massoud. (US Army, Public Domain)

An Afghan policeman escorts election supplies for the 2010 parliamentary vote through the Panjshir Valley. (SHAH MARAI/ AFP via Getty Images)

time controlled perhaps 10 per cent of the country, albeit still including the Panjshir – would emerge as their best allies. It was integrated into the Karzai regime established in 2002 after the defeat of the Taliban.

Since then, though, Afghanistan continues to be roiled by controversy, maladministration, warlordism and civil conflict, with the Taliban resurgent, Islamic State present, a NATO-led multinational military presence remaining in the form of Operation *Resolute Support* (the successor to the former International Security Assistance Force) and Kabul's control over the country often questionable. The Panjshir, though, is considered amongst the safer parts of Afghanistan, and still shows signs of the relatively liberal policies Massoud adopted on women's rights and engagement with the outside world. It falls within the remit of *Resolute Support*'s Train Advise Assist Command – East (TAAC–East) based at Laghman, and the Afghan National Army's 201st Corps and the Afghan National Police's 202nd Zone. Nonetheless, the Panjshiris to a considerable extent continue to look to their own security, and to a considerable degree manage to do it well.

Massoud himself was laid to rest in a mausoleum near his home village of Bazarak in a ceremony attended by hundreds of thousands, which has since become a shrine to Afghan independence. His son, Ahmad Massoud, in 2019 founded a political party, called the Path of Ahmad Shah Massoud, which he hopes will rekindle his father's message of moderation yet defiance to oppression. He was only 12 years old when his father was killed and was then raised in the UK for his own security, attending the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and then reading War Studies at King's College London and International Politics at City University. He is supported by the surviving cadre of Panjshir Front loyalists, including Ahmad Shah Tajuddin.

Meanwhile, the Panjshir Valley looks much as it did when the Soviets left it in 1988, when DRA troops were chased from it in 1979, and when the Khanate of Bukhara gave it to Ahmad Shah Durrani in 1750. From the soaring, snow-capped heights to the flat, fertile valley floor, cut by the meandering waters of the Panjshir River, it remains a place of stark beauty, and one that over the centuries has been periodically baptised in the blood of countless enemies and would-be occupiers, as the Soviets found to their cost.

GLOSSARY AND ACRONYMS

40 *OA*	*40-ya Obshchevoiskovaya Armiya* – 40th Combined-Arms (literally, 'All-Arms') Army
afgantsy	veterans of the Soviet-Afghan War
APC	armoured personnel carrier
BMD	*Boyevaya Mashina Desanta* – airborne combat vehicle
BMP	*Boyevaya Mashina Pyekhoty* – infantry combat vehicle
BTR	*Bronetransportyor* – armoured transporter
DRA	Democratic Republic of Afghanistan
GPZ	*Golovnaya Pokhodnaya Zastava* – Forward Security Element
GRU	*Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravleniye* – Main Intelligence Directorate (of the General Staff) – i.e. military intelligence
grup-i-mutaharek	mobile group (also known as a *motorak*)
grup-i zarbati	shock troops (also known as *zabets*)
Hezb-e Islami	Islamic Party
IFV	infantry fighting vehicle
ISI	Pakistan's military intelligence agency
Jamiat-e Islami	The Islamic Society of Afghanistan
KGB	*Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti* – Committee of State Security
KhAD	*Khadamat-e Aetla'at-e Dawlati* –Afghan State Intelligence Services
mahalli	locals
MLRS	multiple-launch rocket system
motorak	Rebel mobile combat group
OKSVA	*Ogranichenny Kontingent Sovietskikh Voisk v Afganistane* – Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan – i.e. 40th Army
OSN	*Otryad Spetsialnogo Naznacheniya* – Special Purpose Detachment – a *Spetsnaz* unit equivalent to a battalion
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
Sarandoy	'Defenders' – the PDPA's paramilitary gendarmerie, part of the Interior Ministry
shura	Afghan consultative gathering
Shuravi	Afghan name for the Soviets
Spetsnaz	*Spetsialnogo Naznacheniya* – Special Designation – i.e. special forces
TurkVO	*Turkestansky Voyenny Okrug* – Turkestan Military District
ulema	religious scholars
VDV	*Vozdushno-Desantnye Voiska* – Air Assault Troops – i.e. paratroopers
zabets	Rebel local self-defence forces
zastava	small platoon- or company-strength observation post

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The war casts a long shadow. In 1991, Senior Warrant Officer Fyodor Nedelyayev was awarded the Order of the Red Star for his service in the 191st Independent Motorized Rifle Regiment, in particular for the courage he demonstrated during the *Panjshir VII* offensive. The decree confirming this was signed on 19 December, but at the end of the month, the Soviet Union ceased to exist. In the ensuing chaos, the decree was lost until 2014, when it was discovered in the archives of the Black Sea Fleet. Here, Black Sea Fleet commander Admiral Alexander Vitko is belatedly presenting Nedelyayev his medal in 2015. (Mil.ru, CC BY 4.0)

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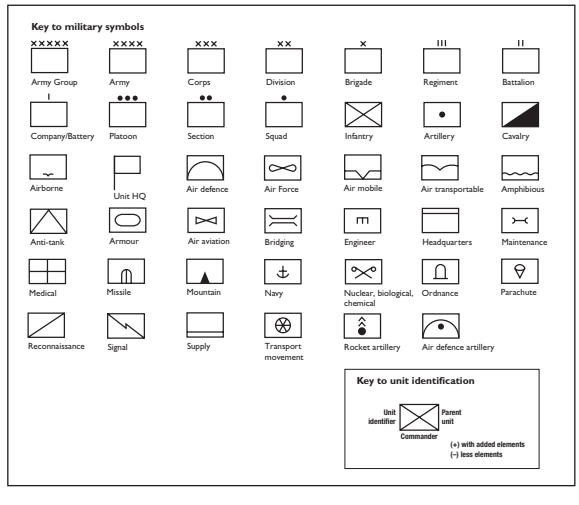
Author's note

Translating out of Cyrillic always poses challenges. With the exception of the genitive masculine *-ogo* ending (that sounds like -ovo), I have generally chosen to transliterate words as they are pronounced (so, for example, Petr is rendered as Pyotr). I have also ignored the diacritical 'soft' and 'hard' signs found in the original. Transliterating from Dari and Pashto are even more of a challenge to a non-speaker, so I have had to rely on the most generally used forms in the English language, even though some will champion Ahmad Shah Massud over Massoud, and so forth.



TITLE PAGE: Soviet paratroopers from the 345th Independent Guards Airborne Regiment, which played such a key role in the Panjshir Valley campaigns. (Mil.ru, CC BY 4.0)